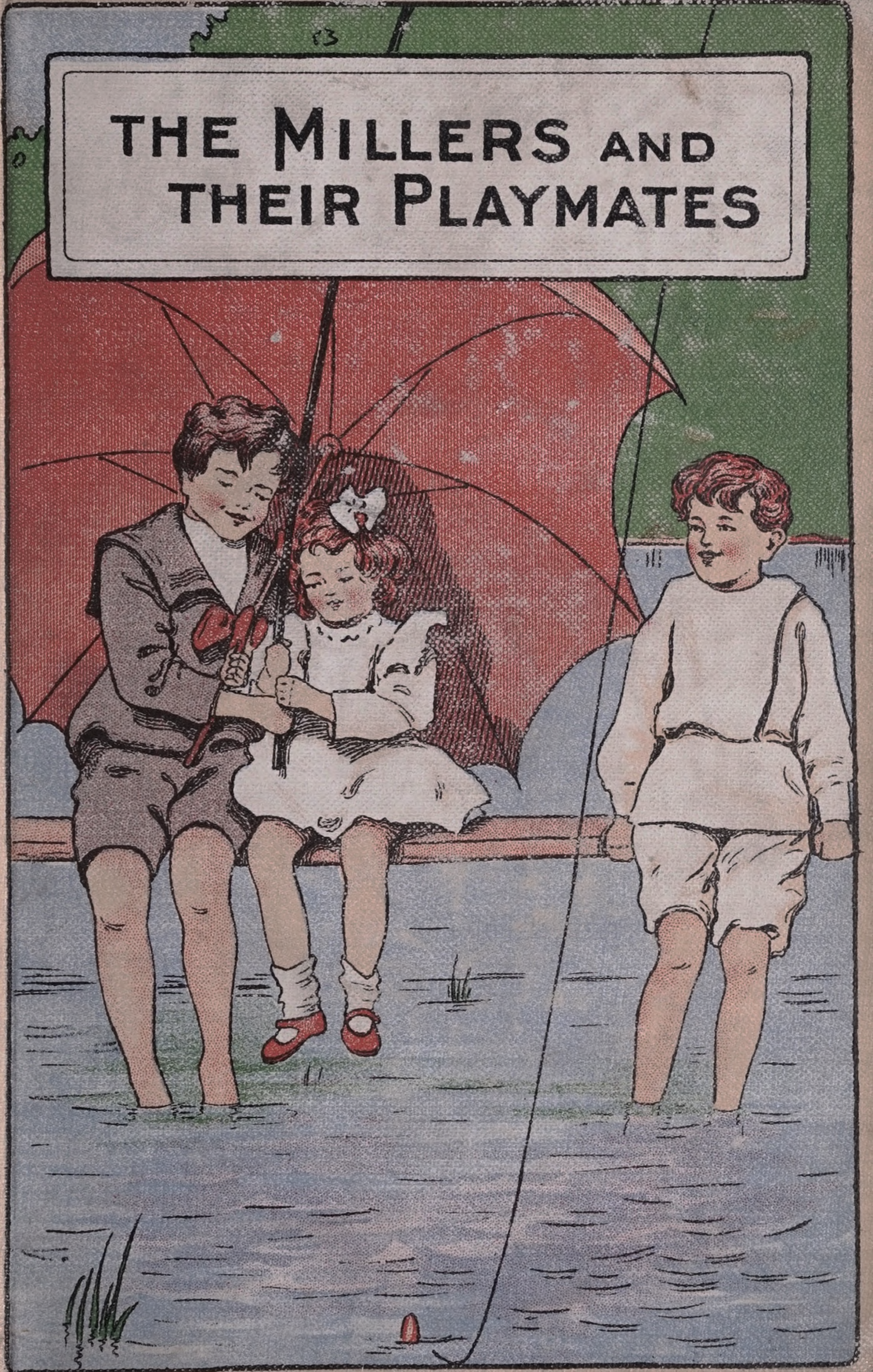
THE MILLERS AND THEIR PLAYMATES



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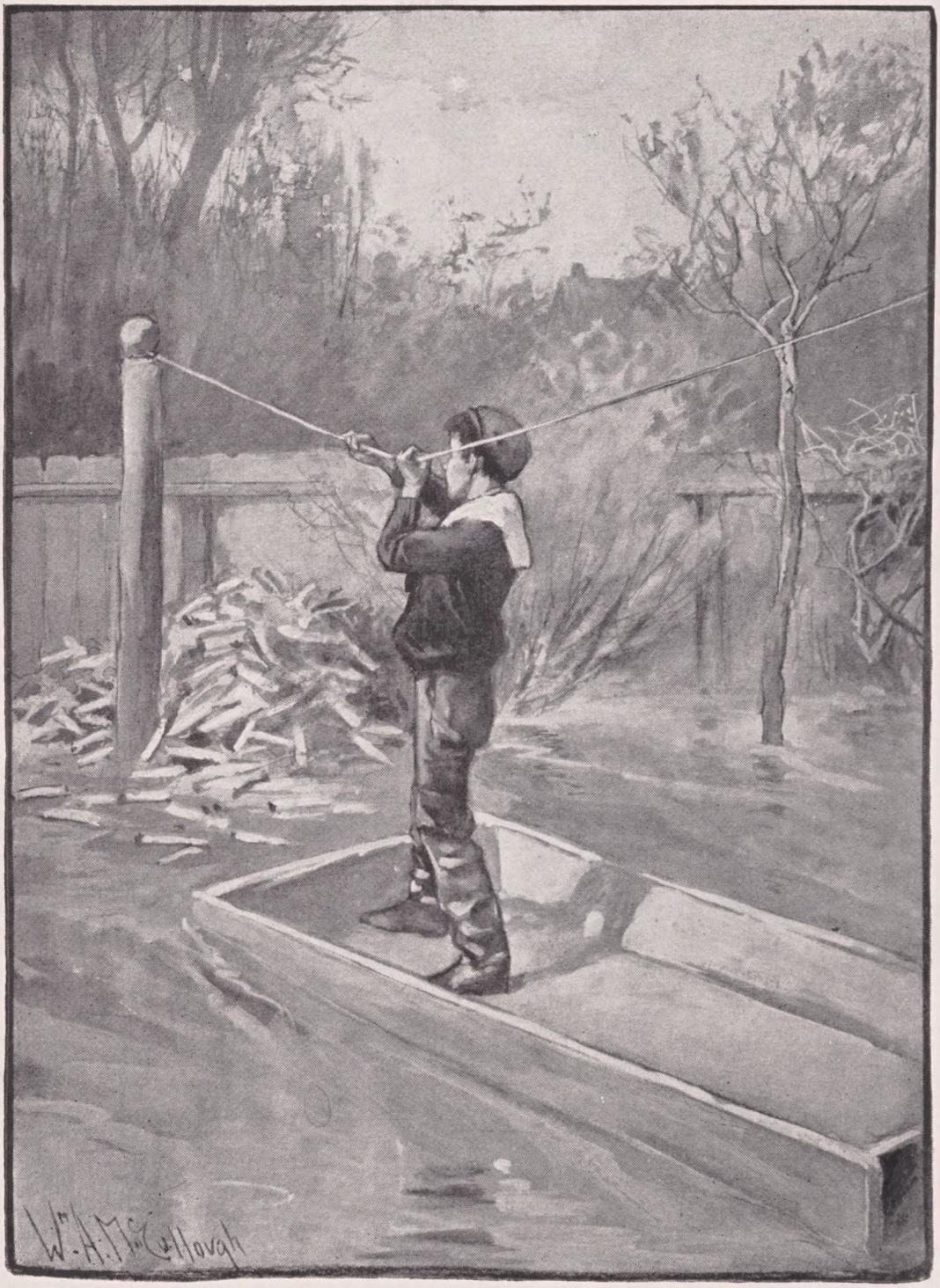

The box moved slowly through the water.

THE MILLERS AND THEIR PLAYMATES

BY

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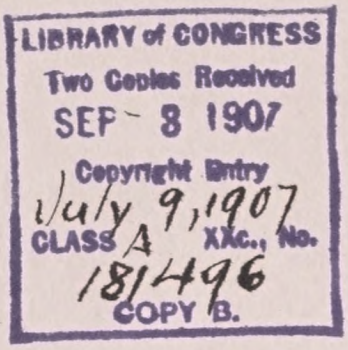

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To my Little Friend
KATHRINE S. JOHNSTON
This Book is Affectionately Dedicated

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THE MILLERS AND THEIR PLAYMATES.

CHAPTER I

BREAKING GROUND FOR THE NEW HOUSE

THE fleecy clouds in the eastern sky were beginning to turn rosy with the first glow of the rising sun when Mr. Miller stole softly into the room where twelve-year-old Ralph and nine-year-old Jack were sleeping.

"Wake up, my sons," he said, rubbing and pinching their cheeks. "Wake up quietly. I have a surprise planned for to-day, so awaken quickly."

At the word "surprise" both boys sat bolt upright, Ralph opening first one eye and then the other, and Jack not trying to

open either, but turning his head from side to side like a tiny kitten whose eyes have not yet opened. Seven-year-old Helen tip-toed through the open door-way, her fingers busily working at the buttons of her little white frock. "Wake up, boys," she said. "We're going to all s'prise Mother, and Father says we have to get up early in the morning to do that."

"Wha-wha-what is the s'prise?" asked Ralph, trying to rub his eyes open.

"B'leeve I know," said Jack, crawling toward the edge of the bed. "It's something about the new house."

"You are a good guesser!" exclaimed Mr. Miller. "You see it is just fifteen years ago that Mother and I were married, and I want her to turn the first earth for the new cellar to-day. The men and the teams will be here at seven and we must do our part before they come. Dress quickly and then you shall awaken Mother and give her a new spade to use. It is all ready down-stairs."

Nobody had to rub his eyes open after

that. They just popped open of themselves like those of a doll when you raise her head. Mr. Miller followed Helen back to her room to help her comb her hair, and both of them laughed to hear the sounds of soft scrambling in the boys' quarters. In about ten minutes all four were ready to tiptoe down to Mrs. Miller's room. The new spade had two dates painted on the handle, the date of the wedding and that of the fifteenth anniversary. First they rapped on the door softly, then more and more loudly, until Mrs. Miller awakened from her dream and called, "Come in."

"Good morning! Wish you many happy returns of the day!" cried the boys, while Helen, much too excited to think straight, shouted, "I wish you Merry Christmas!"

Then they carried the spade in and gave it to her, Mr. Miller explaining his little plan while she examined it. A few minutes later the children went across the street with their father to the ground where the new house was to stand and cleared a small spot

in the centre from weeds and stubble. "I wish she'd hurry," said Ralph. "It seems to me I've been up two hours already."

"Did you tell Aurelia to come?" asked Jack, for to him Aurelia seemed quite as much a member of the family as he himself.

"No," said Mr. Miller. "I meant to, and forgot it. She is especially busy about breakfast this morning, but I think you might better ask her to come over for just a few minutes when Mother does."

The children raced back to the house with the message and soon returned with Mrs. Miller and Aurelia, the latter in her workgown and kitchen apron, and with a dab of flour on one cheek which made her look very queer indeed. Mr. Miller, who had brought over the spade, handed it to his wife with a low bow. "You are to have the first turn," he said.

Now Mrs. Miller was a decidedly clever woman, but she had never used a spade in her life, and it wabbled around in the funniest way imaginable when she tried to force it into the earth. Ralph steadied her

as she threw her weight on it. Jack put both hands on the handle to steady that, and Helen squatted down on the dewy ground to get a clear view of what was happening. At last everybody decided that it had gone deep enough, and then the earth was pried up and thrown to one side." "Where shall I put it?" Mrs. Miller asked, and then, having the spot pointed out to her, she used all her muscle and threw it—in quite another direction!

Mr. Miller took his turn and sent a huge spadeful flying through the air to precisely the spot he had chosen. Ralph, Jack, and Helen followed in order with a great deal of fun and frolic, and then Aurelia declared that she must do her share and get back to her kitchen. "Sakes alive!" she said, "the muffins I left bakin' will be blacker 'n this earth if I don't hurry, and sence this is a sort o' weddin' breakfast things ought to be did right. Ralph, you run over an' take the coffee-pot off 'n the range, please."

Ralph started at once, but he lingered

along, glancing back over his shoulder to see Aurelia work. She had known what it was to spade her mother's garden when she was a girl, and she handled the tool like a man. Ralph had stopped altogether a few feet away, and stood with his hands in his pockets and his mouth open. Aurelia swung the spadeful of earth back, and then, before Ralph realized what she meant to do, it came flying through the air straight toward him. He turned and ran like a frightened colt, and Aurelia, throwing down the spade, raced with him toward the house, her gingham apron fluttering out to one side and her coil of gray hair loosening as she ran.

Nebuchadnezzar, the cat, had been picking his way over to where his mistress stood, and now leaped to one side to let Ralph and Aurelia pass. Mr. and Mrs. Miller walked around to look at the different marking stakes, while Jack and Helen bent over to pick some morning-glories which were blooming in the stubble of the old garden. When the last blossom was plucked they

saw that Nebuchadnezzar was rolling over and over in the freshly turned earth, hitting the lumps here and there with his pretty paws and making queer little sounds of perfect happiness.

"Father! Look at this!" cried Jack. "Neb is taking his turn too. Isn't that a joke!"

"That 's a good idea," said Mr. Miller. "Cats care more about their homes than any other animals, and Neb's home is always with us, so why shouldn't he?"

"Hello, Jack! Going fishing?" cried Patsy Flannigan from the walk.

"No. Going to school. What made you think that?"

"Digging bait, ain't you—are you not?" asked Patsy, who was struggling hard to speak correctly.

"Bait? No," replied Jack. "You see my father and mother were married just fifteen years ago to-day, so we 're sort of celebrating. We got up early so as to break the ground for our new home before the men come. Mother dug the first spadeful and Father the

next, then we children and Aurelia and Neb, only he dug with paws instead of a spade. Father keeps calling Mother 'the bride,' and Aurelia 's going to give us an extra sort of breakfast, and Mother 's going to put on her wedding dress at supper-time, and Father 's going to try to put on his wedding suit, only he 's fatter than he used to be, and maybe he can't, after all. You know it 's always sort of special when folks have been married fifteen years, just as it is when they 've been married five or ten."

"Special how?" asked Helen, who had not quite understood it all.

"Oh, there 's a special sort of thing for that day. It 's wood for five years, and tin for ten, and glass for fifteen. That 's the kind of wedding present to give them then. I 'm going to buy something on my way to school. You see I didn't find out about it ahead."

"I wish I had—" began Patsy, but just then Mrs. Miller called "Breakfast!" from across the street, so his sentence was not finished. The Millers hurried off to the

"extra" breakfast, and then watched the men and teams at work on the new cellar until the second bell for school was ringing, and they had to go.

There was great excitement among the pupils of several grades that morning. Ralph and Jack could not find out the reason. Often one of them would walk up to a group of whispering children, only to hear a warning "Sh-h!" and find that they were not wanted. Yet they were kindly treated, for Jack was presented with a top, a half stick of licorice, and an old baseball before noon, while Ralph received a broken-bladed knife and a wad of red cord.

After dinner it was just the same, only worse, for the very children whom the boys knew best kept handing money to Patsy Flannigan, who was also permitted by his teacher to visit the room where Janice Field and Sally James were.

At recess Patsy consulted the rest and then invited Ralph and Jack into a corner, whispering close to their ears and then saying out loud, "Now don't you let on!"

"We won't," declared Ralph. "But may we tell Helen?"

"If she won't let on," said Patsy.

"She won't," said Ralph, "I make her say 'Truly, truly, black and bluely' first and then she is always all right."

The Millers had their supper at six, and Mrs. Miller, in her pretty, old-fashioned wedding gown, was just passing tiny scraps of her fifteen-year-old wedding cake at the close of the meal, when the door-bell rang and a queer sort of giggling sound came from beyond the closed door.

"May I go, please?" cried each of the three children.

"Yes," said Mrs. Miller.

Through the quickly-opened door came all the members of the Saturday Club, the children's natural history society, which Mrs. Miller had started two years before, and which Professor Harding had also helped along. All the children wore their best clothing. Patsy carried a flat, round parcel, Maggie Flynn a long and slender one, and

Bertha Clarke, who was the youngest member of the club, had a beautiful bouquet of white cosmos in her two hands.

Mr. Miller knew in a minute what it all meant. In fact, he had rather suspected some surprise from the way his children had acted at the table. "Come right into the sitting-room," he said heartily. "I declare, this looks to me like a club meeting!"

"Won't you take off your wraps?" added Mrs. Miller, who had followed her husband in.

"No, thank you," said the children. Maggie and Patsy stepped in front of the rest.

"We came to congratulate you on your crystal wedding," said Patsy, who had been advised by Professor Harding about what to say, "and to bring you both a gift from the Saturday Club, with our love." He put his package into Mr. Miller's hands and said, "Please open it now."

Mr. Miller did so and found a circular mirror to lay in the middle of the dining table. He held it flat and told Mrs. Miller to look at it. Then Maggie spoke.

"This goes with it," she said and handed Mrs. Miller her package. Mrs. Miller opened it and found a pretty little glass vase, which she set on the mirror.

"And Mamma sent these," added Bertha Clarke, handing Mrs. Miller the flowers. "She said I was to tell you that they came from a club mother."

The flowers were put into the vase, which Helen filled with water, and then Mr. Miller made a little speech of thanks, while Mrs. Miller looked at the pretty gifts as they sat on the table.

The children would have left at once after presenting their gifts, had not Mrs. Miller begged them to stay at least a quarter of an hour. Ralph, Jack, and Helen were sent with messages to Aurelia and soon returned with trays in their hands, passing tiny glasses of sweet cider, square pieces of the new white cake which Aurelia called "the bride's loaf," and last and best of all tiny pieces of the original dark wedding cake, pieces about as

big as dice, which the children ate with a sort of solemn joy.

Then they arose, having been advised by Professor Hardy not to remain long, shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Miller, and went home. As soon as they were outside the door Ben Stuart and Sammy Robinson began joking Patsy. "Aha!" they said, "did say 'love,' didn't you, in your speech? Thought you told the Prof. you wouldn't! Thought you said you were going to say 'greetings' instead."

"What made you change, Patsy?" asked Maggie. "I liked it best this way, though."

"What made me change?" repeated Patsy. "Sure, it just slid out without me thinking."

"Wasn't that dress a beauty, though? I never saw her all fixed up before."

"She's a peach," said the slangy Ben Stuart.

"You bet she is!" said the other boys.

And the girls? Well, they did not say much, but they thought a good deal.

CHAPTER II

BUILDING THE PLAYHOUSE

THAT was a most exciting October for the three little Millers. There was so much to see and so much to do that Jack thought it was really very hard to have to go to school. He went every day, however, and did not once pretend to be ill, as you remember he had done when smaller. First there was that interesting procession of teams and drays passing down into one end of the new cellar and up at the other, carrying a load of earth each time to be dumped on the big pile in the back yard.

Then there were the loads of stone to watch, as they were slowly thrown off in the front yard. It was interesting to climb around on the pile in the sunshine, or on a still day to find some cubby in the pile and curl up there with the sun-warmed stones

sending out their heat to the lazy and comfortable child in the cubby. Neb found out how comfortable it was and often sat on the top of the heap with his feet tucked under him and his tail neatly folded around them.

And when the masons were breaking the stones, all the children began collections of the pieces. To get the whitest white piece and the reddest red piece took time, and then there were other colors and interesting speckled sorts. Once Helen felt perfectly sure that she had found bits of gold in a speckled piece, and ran in great excitement to her father.

"Do see," she cried, "it shines just like my ring Grandmother gave me. Now won't we all be rich?"

"It is pretty," he said, "very pretty indeed. But why do you want to be rich?"

"So's to have more money, of course," said Helen.

"And why do you need more money?" he asked. "Are you hungry, or poorly

dressed, or sick and unable to pay for medicine?"

"No-o," said Helen, who had an idea that he was making fun of her. "I guess I just wanted it so I could sit around and say 'I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm just richer 'n mud!'"

Then they both laughed and laughed and laughed, and Mr. Miller said: "Well, this is not gold. I think these shining bits are called iron pyrites. But I see no reason why you should not sit around and say that you are rich, if you would enjoy doing so. You are really *very* rich, you know, in other things besides money. Only you ought not to let people hear you, for they might misunderstand and think you meant money, and that you were lying. Say it to yourself and Nebuchadnezzar."

"All right," she replied with a giggle. "I guess it won't hurt him any."

It was while she was following this advice that it occurred to her to want a playhouse. That was one thing she had not, and she spoke of it to her brothers.

"We could build one all right, if we only had the boards and stuff," said Ralph. "Jack, you ask Father if he can't give us some."

"All right," said Jack, "I'll ask him after supper."

Mr. Miller thought it a good idea, told them where they might build it in the back yard, and promised that when the family moved to the new place the playhouse should go too. An old lumber pile was given to them and a pound of nails apiece as a beginning. "You must use your own tools," said Mr. Miller, "and buy all your nails after these are gone."

"Whee-ee-ee! Whoopee!" cried Jack. "Come on, Ralph and Helen. It's light enough to see something. Let's look at the pile to-night and then get up early in the morning."

"Glad it'll be Saturday," remarked Ralph.

The next morning all the neighboring children stopped in for a minute and stayed to help. The contractor for the new house became interested and gave them a little aid,

and by ten o'clock the corner posts of a six-foot square house were up, with timbers to connect them at both top and bottom.

"Wish we could put a cupola on it," said Ralph.

"So do I," said Maggie. "They 're so sort of stylish-looking,"

"Besides," added Jack, "it would be so handy whenever we had a grown-up visitor. You see he could stand right in the middle and let his head stick up in it."

"Yup ! I mean yes," said Patsy Flannigan, "or else you might just leave a hole there for his head, the way they do with giraffes in circus wagons. Come up, come up, ladies and gentlemen, to see the most *re*-markable *gi*-raffe in captivity !"

"And *in*spect the educated monkey !" added Maggie wickedly, with a little gesture toward Patsy, who had played a joke on her the day before.

When the laughter was over Ralph ended discussion by saying: "This is not to be a

show wagon or a theological garden, but an h-o-u-s-e. Somebody get me a board."

Maggie worked right with the boys, using the tools as well as they and pounding her nails as straight. Sallie, Janice, Bertha, and Helen picked up the dropped nails, tidied the ground around (it was built in what had been part of the garden), and then began sticking old shingles in the ground to mark out a door-yard.

When the roof was on, they all sat down under it to rest. "Have some pie-plant?" said Jack, thinking that refreshments of some sort would be welcome. "I'll get it." And he passed around nine big but rather limp stalks.

"Boys," exclaimed Maggie, "we've clean forgot the cellar!"

"We couldn't have one," they said.

"Yes, we could," she insisted. "Anyhow we could call it that and keep things in it, the way they used to in the dirt floor slave cabins teacher read about last week. Let's just dig a hole in the ground and set a

box down in it with a lid. Then we could put some food down there and play it was a trap-door when we raised the lid.

"I fink," remarked Helen, "that I will dig the cellar myself."

"Pooh, you can't do that! That's boys' work," said Jack.

Helen straightened herself with great dignity. "I fought about the house first," she said, "and *I fink I shall dig that cellar.*"

"Aw, let her," begged Jimmy, "It'll be lots of fun for her, and the other little girls can help carry away the dirt. I've got a box over home that'll be just right."

So Helen dug the cellar with a trowel, blistering her hands and bending the trowel, but making a hole large enough to take in Jimmy's box after he had trimmed out the corners with his spade. The plan of the house was this: a door in the middle of the front, a board seat built the whole length of each side, and a place in the middle of the back side for a stove. The cellar was under the front end of one of the seats. The roof

Helen dug the cellar.

was about six feet from the ground in front and somewhat lower in the back. There was no window.

The boards for the house were quite wide, and those for the roof and the front of the house were already the right length; so with five builders and four little helpers the work got along very fast, in spite of the times when they all stopped for a game of tag or still-waters.

At four o'clock Ralph flung down his hammer and said: "She's done for to-day, even if the hinges are not on the door. I have three blisters on my hands and one place where the saw slipped and scratched me, and I don't know how many times I've pounded my fingers."

"Me too!" said Jack.

"I've quit," said Patsy.

"So've I," said Jimmy.

The little girls had already gone into the house for water, but Maggie, the worker, was not ready to stop. "I'd feel better if I knew where we could get a stove," said

she. "I just *ache* to cook something in this dear little house, and I can't do it without a stove. Can't you boys think of one? It seems to me that I saw one thrown away somewhere last week, but I can't think where."

"Oh, do," begged the four boys. "We 'll keep as still as mice while you try."

There was a long silence. "It 's no use," she said at last. "I can't do it now! But I just believe I shall remember it yet."

Maggie had to go home to help her mother, and the boys lingered in the little cabin for which they had worked so hard. Of course they spoke about the stove.

"Maggie 'll remember it," declared Jimmie. "She never forgets entirely for good. She 's like a witch to find things, Mrs. Flynn says."

"Maggie 's as clever as any of us fellows —almost," said Jack. "It 's too bad she 's a girl."

"Well," said Patsy slowly, "I used to think girls was n't any good, but there 's a

few I like first-class. She 's one. She 's so handy with tools—*can't* she drive nails, though!"

At eight o'clock that night, when the little Millers were all in bed, the front door-bell rang. Mrs. Miller answered it and the boys, from their room upstairs, heard her say, "Why, yes, certainly, but do not talk long."

A minute later Patsy's whistle brought all three children to the open windows beside their beds. "What is it?" they asked in great excitement.

"We got it," said Maggie's voice in the darkness. "The stove, you know. I went home and thought just fit to bust me head, and after supper I knew. I had seen it down near the station and it was an old potato stove."*

"You just ought to see it, boys," said Jimmie. "Maggie came over to tell us right

* A small cheap stove made for use in box-cars in which potatoes are shipped in cold weather, and often thrown away when spring comes.

after supper and we went down with ner to get it——"

"They 'd thrown it away last spring, you know," interrupted Patsy, "after they had shipped all their potatoes, and——"

"Strike a match, Patsy, so they can see it," directed Maggie. "Sure, it will be just elegant in the playhouse."

Patsy struck several matches, so the children upstairs had several short looks at the stove. "Is n't that slick, though!" the boys were heard to say.

Patsy, proud to help in securing the prize, turned it around and around with one hand while holding matches with the other. "It 's *almost* as good as new," he declared. "It needs blacking some, but most stoves do now and then. Jimmie has some bricks he 'll let us take for legs, because there 's only one left in the stove, and I 'm pretty sure we can get some pipe somewhere."

"I know we can," said Jack. "I know just where I saw some on father's scrap-iron pile."

"Won't you let me cook the first fing?" asked Helen from her window.

"Uh-*uh*," said Ralph. "Maggie got the stove, so she ought to have the first chance."

"Oh, let her," begged Maggie. "She was the one that thought about the house. I'd just as lief as not, and I'll be second cook."

"All right," agreed Ralph.

"I told your mother we would n't talk long," said Maggie, "and my mother said I must n't stay out any later 'n I could help, so good-night. We 'll put the stove in the playhouse and then we 'll have a party there Monday night after school."

"Good night!" called the little Millers, and tumbled into their beds again. Jack spoke just once after that, and then he said, "How I *wish* we could put off Sundays instead of putting off parties!"

* * * * *

That Sunday was certainly the longest one the Miller children had ever known. Usually they were very fond of the day,

with its special books and privileges and with their father at home. It was always understood that on that day they were not to go visiting or have other children visit them; and, however much Maggie and the Flannigans longed to visit the little house they had helped to build, they knew the rule too well to come over, so they waved their hands whenever Ralph or Jack or Helen looked over the back fence toward their homes, or called softly "To-morrow! You know!"

It was some consolation to be allowed to get together a few colored prints for the walls and put them up with pins, and to carry out a few old cooking utensils which Aurelia set out for them while they wiped and put away the dinner dishes for her. They were also allowed to pick out and scrub up a dozen potatoes each to store away in the tiny cellar, and to pick out the smallest cabbage of the many standing in the garden and store that away.

"That cabbage is a great scheme," said

Jack. "Before we had that we could only say 'the potatoes in our cellar,' but now we can say 'our winter vegetables.'"

They ate their Sunday night lunch there, too. It was just the regular bread and milk and cheese which they always had for Sunday lunch, but it had what Helen called "a sort of extra flavor." When that was eaten and it began to grow dark, Mr. Miller called them to come in for their Sunday evening hour around the piano.

"O dear," sighed Jack. "I just *hate* to go! Don't you wish we could sleep here, Ralph?"

"It would be fine," said Ralph. "You could sleep on one side and I could sleep on the other."

"Guess you would n't be very comfortable," remarked Helen. "I 'd rather sleep in my own little room."

"Pooh! That 's cause you 're a girl," said Jack. "It 's different with us boys and men!"

"I should say so," agreed Ralph. "Just

think how soldiers do, and hunters. They just sleep anywhere. I expect the sort of men who hunt bears could just lie right down on a bumpy log and sleep all night, without rolling off or even thinking it was hard."

"Let's ask Mother," said Jack.

"She won't let you," said Helen.

"Well, it won't do any harm to ask," said Ralph. "That's what she always says, you know. We may ask her anything, only we must do it pleasantly and when she is not busy, and then keep sweet if she says 'No.'"

And that was how it happened that, after they had sung a few songs together, Ralph asked and received permission for both boys to sleep in the playhouse that night. They were to dress more warmly than usual for the night, and were to carry out pillows and blankets. Mrs. Miller hung a key to the back door around Ralph's neck and left the light burning on the back porch. "If you should want to come into your own

beds," she said, "bring in your bedding and lock the door after you. Then find your way up-stairs as quietly as you can, so as not to disturb anybody."

"All right," said Ralph, "we 'll remember, but we won't come. It 'll be too cosey out there."

"You just have somebody come out and call us in time for breakfast," added Jack. "Give us about half an hour warning. I s 'pose we can sort of wrap a blanket around to hide our pajamas."

"Yes, that will be all right," said Mr. Miller. "Now, good-night, and pleasant dreams! Be sure to tuck up well."

"We will! We will!" cried the boys as they found their way out to the playhouse by the rays of the porch light. Mr. and Mrs. Miller went into the sitting-room on the farther side of the house and began to read. Helen was already in bed.

The playhouse door was not yet in place, so there was plenty of fresh air within, and the middle of the tiny room was dimly

lighted. The boys made their beds joyfully and lay down.

"What way are you going to sleep?" asked Jack.

"On my back," replied Ralph.

"I'm going to sleep on my side, so I can look at you," said Jack.

Then there was silence, for they had promised to try to go directly to sleep.

Ralph sighed.

Jack wriggled.

Ralph said, "Jack, are you awake?"

Jack said, "Yes. Are you?"

Then it was still again.

Ralph sat upright. "I'm going to lie down a different way," he said. "I'm going to sleep on my side."

"Don't," Jack said with great earnestness. "It isn't any good that way, I'm going to sleep on my back."

"You won't like it," advised Ralph.

"Don't care! I'm going to try it."

After a period of wriggling and rearranging all was silent again.

Slap! came Jack's hand against his cheek.

"What 's the matter?" asked Ralph.

"Mosquito!" answered Jack. "I did n't hear him, but I was sure I felt him."

"Guess you imagined it," said Ralph. "I have n't seen one in a week. Frost killed them most likely."

"Well, now I 've sort of got awake again, I 'm going to try sleeping on my face," said Jack. "Is n't it funny how hard your bones get when you don't sleep in a bed?"

"*Uh*-huh. My board doesn't seem to fit me just right, somehow," replied Ralph.

Another silence lasted a few minutes and was broken by Ralph, who slapped his arm half a dozen times as hard as he could. "It *is* a mosquito after all," he said.

And so it went for some time, until the rising wind brought them a queer long-drawn groaning sound. Jack raised himself on his elbow. The sound was repeated. "Ralph!" whispered Jack. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes, I did," said Ralph rather impatiently. "What of it?"

"Nothing of it!" retorted Jack. "Course I know it is n't anything, but I was just going to ask you if you did n't think panthers howled that way. I thought it would interest you. If you don't care about learning any more natural history, you need n't. *I* won't lie awake any longer trying to teach you things."

"Natural history!" snorted Ralph. "That 's the door of Flannigan's wood-shed, and they forgot to fasten it shut."

Before long Ralph said, "Jack! I 'm very thirsty and a little hungry. Do you s'pose we could get into the house without awakening anybody? Perhaps we 'd better carry in our things and stay there, if we do go, so as not to have to open and shut the outside door twice."

"I don't really *want* to stay in," said Jack, "but p'raps we 'd better. I was worrying a little about my school to-morrow. You know Mother always says children

can't study well unless they have plenty of sleep."

"All right," said Ralph. "If you feel that way, perhaps we'd better stay in. It must be two o'clock anyhow by this time."

They gathered up pillows and blankets and stole towards the house. They drank water in the kitchen and munched crackers in the pantry, then tiptoed into the front hall. Light came through the sitting-room door-way. "Father forgot to turn it out," whispered Ralph. "I'll go in and do it." They turned on the hall light and went toward the sitting-room. In the door-way they stopped. There sat Mr. and Mrs. Miller quietly reading.

"W-what are you up for so late?" stammered Jack.

Ralph glanced at the clock. It was just half past nine. Ralph had dignity and good manners. "Thank you very much for letting us stay in the playhouse," he said. "We decided, though, to come in for the rest of the night."

"We thought we'd better on account of school to-morrow, you know," added Jack. "I have a very hard 'rithmetic lesson to get, and there was so much to think of out there that I was n't going to sleep very fast."

Mrs. Miller smiled. "I think you were very sensible," said she.

"So do I," said Mr. Miller.

The boys went up-stairs, made their beds, and stretched out in them.

"This is good enough for me," said Ralph.

"Me too," said Jack.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAYHOUSE PARTY

AT last Monday's school was over, and the children who were to cook their supper in the playhouse ran every step of the way to it. Their eagerness was all the greater because they did not have to wait and hunt around for any stove-pipe. When Ralph peeped in through the open doorway at noon, he had found enough pipe lying beside the old stove, with a brown-paper tag on it, "With the compliments of Father." Now all they had to do was to set the stove on its brick legs, adjust the pipe, build the fire, cook, and eat. It seemed very simple indeed to them.

Everybody looked at the stove-pipe first. Jack said, "I s'pose it isn't very nice of me, but I do wish it was new."

"So do I," said Ralph.

"That's just like boys," scolded Maggie. "How do you think my stove would look with elegant new black pipe on it? I'd rather have it the way it is. Some people would say, 'I wish I had some blacking and a brush to shine it up.'"

"Means you fellows!" said Patsy.

"Did you, Maggie?" asked Jack. Ralph knew better than to ask. But Maggie did not answer.

The boys took off their coats and shoved up their sleeves and began to put on the ways of grown-up workmen. Patsy took to this now quite as naturally as Ralph had done when they were building the play-house. His father often helped with the house-cleaning, and Patsy knew just how such things should be managed. In his excitement he forgot his efforts to speak the best of English and dropped back into the way of talking which he had used all the time until two years before when he had decided to become a college professor.

"Pick up them bricks there, Jimmie!" he

said. "Help him slip 'em under there, Jack. Miller [this was to Ralph], you help me lift this stove around. All together now! Up she goes! Fix that brick there, Jimmie. You fix yours now, Jack. Wait till I try her to see if she wobbles. Yank that pebble out from under your brick there, Jack. Your bricks don't set straight."

"*I won't*," declared Jack with blazing eyes. "I don't mind being bossed part of the time, as long as I have a chance to boss some, myself, after a while, but you need *not* think I'll stand it to have you call me just Jack. You got to call me 'Miller' too!"

"Aw, come on," said Patsy good-naturedly enough. "I didn't mean anything. You're only a little boy anyhow, you know. Besides we'll get all mixed up if I call you both the same thing."

"Maybe I am a little boy," sputtered Jack, "but you're more of little boy than I am because you're bigger. And you can call me Jones if you want to, or Smith, or anything, and I'll work all right, but I won't do

things if you and Ralph are going to put on airs."

Of course Jack was unreasonable. He missed the sleep he lost the night before and had been out-of-sorts once or twice in school. But Patsy did the sensible thing. "All right, Jones," he said, "just fix that pebble now, will you? And you, Smith [to Jimmie], help Miller hold the pipe while I jine it on."

Soon the stove was ready for the fire and Jack "bossed" that, with Jimmy as chief helper. "Here you, Smith," he said, "hand up that kindling [it was about eight inches from his own foot]! Flannigan [that was Patsy, you know], run into the house for some matches, will you? Miller, you bring in four more sticks of wood." He stood with one hand in a hip pocket while waiting for the matches, that being a favorite position with the head builder of the new house, when standing idle.

After a few puffs of smoke, which filled the tiny building and sent the children

coughing into the open air, the little fire burned merrily. Jimmie was not the stuff of which leaders are made and sought no responsibility, so nobody disputed Maggie and Helen their chance to manage the cooking, and Maggie took charge at once. "Step lively now, the lot of ye men folks," she said. "*Mister* Flannigan, will you kindly fill this kettle with water? *Mister* Miller, will you kindly go down cellar after the potatoes? *Mister* Jones, I'll thank you to put another stick of wood into the stove. *Mister* Smith, run over home and ask my mother to let me take the little red-handled knife for peeling the potatoes, and Jimmie, if she is n't there you just take it anyhow. It 's in the box on the kitchen table, and you can walk right in."

"How many potatoes do you want, Maggie," asked Ralph.

"I don't know," answered Maggie. "Helen is really going to cook them, you know."

"I fink I want six," said Helen gravely, "that 's just how many of us there are, is n't it?"

"You'd better have two apiece, anyhow," advised Ralph. "I tell you such work as putting up stoves makes men hungry."

"And our mother always says it's a good plan to have enough so you can ask a friend to stay to supper if you want to," added Jack.

"Six times two is twelve and two more is fourteen. That looks like a good many," said Maggie, who was used to seeing her mother cook potatoes for only two. "I guess, Helen, you'd better not try to peel 'em if there's such a lot. Just slice a little of the paring off'n each end and sort of scratch down the sides a couple o' times with the point of your knife. I'll show you how."

So Helen went to work upon her fourteen already scrubbed potatoes, and Maggie looked around restlessly for something else to do. "It's a shame not to use that elegant great frying-pan! I just ache to cook something in it," she said.

"How do you fix tomatoes?" asked

Kindly fill the kettle, Mr. Miller.

Patsy. "Do you fry 'em or bake 'em?"

"Stew them of course," said Maggie. "What made you ask about tomat——Jack, do you suppose we *could* have those out in the garden?"

"I know we could," replied Jack. "Mother has used all she wants, and told me to pick the rest and put them into the garbage can, but I forgot it."

"Come on then," cried Maggie. "Let's get some and cook them for our supper. Don't take any that are squashy, please. They are not good."

"Maggie," shouted Patsy, from the doorway of the playhouse, "Helen wants to know how long you cook potatoes."

"Not more'n half an hour," Maggie called back. "When you stick a big fork into them and they slide off from it, they're done."

"I'll time them with my watch," said Ralph, as the potatoes were dumped into the kettle. "But *doesn't* Maggie know a lot, though! I don't see how women can

remember all these things about cooking without writing them down. I believe if you should awaken Aurelia in the middle of the night and ask her how to make fried cakes, she'd tell you. Or cream puffs. Or sponge cake."

"I expect it's pretty much the same way we fellows remember about 'fends' and 'dubs' and 'fans' and 'taw' in marble season," said Patsy. "Those interest us and cooking interests them."

"It's a good fing for you boys that we do remember such fings," said Helen gravely. "And I fink cooking is a good deal more usefuler than marbles, 'cause you can't eat them."

"But they last longer," retorted Patsy, with twinkling eyes. "The trouble with vittles is that they don't keep."

Here Maggie and Jack returned with the tomatoes, which were soon peeled and sliced into the frying-pan to cook. It took careful planning to get both kettle and frying-pan on top of the little stove at once,

and then they had to be looked after most carefully whenever a stick of wood was put inside.

Presently Ralph looked at his watch. "It's twenty minutes now," he said. "Shall I try the potatoes, Maggie?"

"I fink I will try my own potatoes," said Helen. "Maggie! They are not any much soft at all yet."

Maggie gave a quick look. "Sure the water's not boiling at all yet," said she. "When did you begin to count the time, Ralph?"

"When Helen put them in, of course," he replied. "Was n't that right?"

"Faith, no!" said she. "They can't cook till the water boils, and it is just after beginning."

"Oh," said Ralph. "I did n't understand that. I'll start over again. But, say, Maggie, I'm hungrier 'n a bear."

"Better be getting your other stuff and the dishes," said Maggie. "I'll go over home for mine as soon as you get back.

All you boys go right off, and get back in time to put in the next stick of wood for us."

The Flannigans cut across lots, and Ralph and Jack were just vanishing inside the kitchen door, when Maggie called, "Bring out some butter for the tomatoes!"

"And salt," added Helen.

"And pepper," called Maggie.

"Uh-*uh*! Mother does n't believe in pepper for children, so they can't," said Helen.

"All right," said Maggie. "I don't much care, and we won't tell Patsy and Jimmie."

By this time the playhouse was very hot, so they set the table, a box, outside. Bread and butter, cookies, dried beef, and apples made quite a showing. The seats were of various kinds, one stone, one small box, one chunk of firewood, and three pumpkins, which were to be made into jack-o' lanterns for Hallowe'en.

All stood in an eager circle while Helen tested the potatoes. They were not quite done. The boys were so restless that Maggie advised them to play tag until supper

should be ready, and they ran off with a shout to take her advice, promising to return the minute they were called. Helen was anxious about the potatoes. "Are you sure they will be all right?" she asked several times. "You know I truly never boiled anything before, and boiling is much harder than frying or broiling, the way Aurelia lets us do, because it is down inside, so that you can't watch it."

"Don't you worry," the older girl told her. "They'll be just fine, that's what they will. Me mother always says there is nothing like potatoes. She says that in the ould country the people sometimes have hardly anything else to eat, and that when you can have salt on them they are fit for a king."

"*When you have salt on them!*" exclaimed Helen. "Why folks *never* eat them without salt, do they?"

"Sure," said Maggie. "I've done it lots of times. When me father was killed on the railroad and I was a bit of a girl, he owed

some money on the house over there. Me mother was set on keeping the house, and she took in washings to get money to pay for it. And how she saved the pennies! I remember, when she was getting the money together for the last payment, the salt bag got empty and she would n't get any more till she was sure she would have money left after the house was paid for. You see she was afraid that she would n't have quite enough, and she had to be sure."

"And did you eat potatoes without salt then?" asked Helen.

"Yes, for more 'n a week," said Maggie, "and then one night I came in from playing and saw a new bag of salt on the kitchen table, and asked her if it meant that the house was all paid for. And she said, 'Yes, thank God!' We had boiled potatoes with salt on them that night, and I tell you they tasted good. And after supper she showed me her pocket-book and there was just eight cents left in it."

"Poor Maggie," said Helen. "I 'm going

to eat one of mine without salt to-night just to see how bad it was for you. Don't you s'pose they 're most done now ?"

" Done to a turn," answered Maggie after one quick look. Then, while Helen was lifting them carefully out, she called the boys. They answered from near the hydrant in the lawn, and the girls waited and waited for them to appear. Helen sat upon a somewhat wabbly pumpkin, with the pan of steaming potatoes in front of her. Maggie was on the box at the other end, with the tomatoes in front of her, still in the frying-pan.

Then the boys came. Tag had left them flushed, their plentiful washing at the hydrant had left them very wet in streaks, and their hair was most carefully plastered down all over their heads. But they came as gentlemen come to a party, with good manners. It was a great surprise to the girls, and they never found out that it came from a hint which Mr. Miller dropped as he passed in to his supper. Helen felt for her

hair-ribbon and straightened it. Maggie wiped her hot face with her handkerchief, and hoped that nobody would see where she had spilled tomatoes on her gingham dress.

The boys felt so changed by their elaborate toilet that they acted a little stiff. It was Jimmie who started the chatter again. "Bet you girls can't guess how we parted our hair!" he remarked.

"With a comb of course," said Helen.

"With your fingers," said Maggie.

"Thought you could n't," cried Jimmie. "We did it with a chip. Did you hear Jack holler? He squirmed and the chip sort of dug into his skin. He said Ralph did it on purpose, but he did n't. You can see the place now, if you look."

"Poor Jack," said Helen. "Why did n't you go into the house and get a comb?"

"He dars n't," interrupted Jimmie. "Last time we went in for something, Aurelia said that just as sure as another boy came traipsing into the house she 'd keep him there the rest of the day."

"It was nice of you boys to slick up so," said Maggie, serving the stewed tomatoes in tin cups as she spoke. "Helen and I didn't have any chance to fix ourselves, because we couldn't leave our cooking."

"Jack didn't really want to," remarked Jimmie, who was always telling things that might better have been untold. "That's why he squirmed so."

"You'd better not say anything yourself, Jimmie Flannigan," said Jack wrathfully. "You know you wouldn't have done it if Patsy hadn't made you!"

Maggie hurried a cup of tomatoes over to Jack and stopped his talking.

"It's sort of funny about me," said Ralph. "I used to just *hate* to get clean, and now I don't mind it at all—by spells. Sometimes I really enjoy it, especially if I am going to be around with folks that are clean themselves."

"Same with me," agreed Patsy. "My mother says it's a sign I am growing up."

During this talk all had been preparing

their potatoes and arranging the food on their tin plates. Now they began eating. Patsy took the first mouthful. "These potatoes are very nice," he said to Helen.

"Mine are delicious." said Ralph.

"They 're dandy," said Jack.

"Mine are awfully good," said Jimmie.

"Fank you," said Helen, who had often heard her mother thank the family for complimenting her cooking. Then she explained to Maggie, "I got salt on mine before I fought, but I 'm going to try some without, by-and-by."

That suggested the story of how Mrs. Flynn had washed and saved for the house. The boys had not heard it and were much impressed. It had never occurred to them that their little back street neighbor was poor, although she lived in a small house and often helped her mother with her washings and ironings. The Flannigan home was not much larger, but Mr. Flannigan was a hard-working man and his wife was a good housekeeper, so they were always sure of

enough to eat and comfortable clothing to wear.

"Are you poor now?" asked Ralph, solemnly.

"Indeed we're not," replied Maggie, happily. "Me mother says that any two people with good strong bodies like we have, and a tidy little home, and plenty to eat and wear, and twenty-seven hens, and a good pig in the pen are in great luck. Besides, she has two hundred and forty-seven dollars in the bank at interest, and if her washings don't fall off, nor me break any more legs, it'll be three hundred by next fall."

"Jiminy! Ain't you glad, though?" asked Jack.

"You bet I am," said Maggie. "I mean, of course I am."

"Tell you what you ought to do," suggested Ralph, who had been reading lately in one of his father's books. "You ought to have a real poor supper once a year on the an-ni-ver-sa-ry of your mother's getting the house paid for, just to remind you of the

hard times you used to have and got over. You know how the Jews do at Passover, don't you? Of course they have lamb to eat, and that is good, but then they have unleavened bread and bitter herbs, to remind them of the hard times their people had under the Egyptians and they '*eat those for remembrance.*' I think you ought to eat your potatoes without salt once a year 'for remembrance.' I would, if I were you. My father says it is good for people to do such things."

"Perhaps I will," said Maggie doubtfully. "I'll tell my mother about it anyhow."

"Maggie," said Jack, "these tomatoes are very nice."

"They look just like what Aurelia cooks," said Ralph.

"I am very glad you thought of them," said Patsy.

"They're elegant," said Jimmie, "but is n't it funny how sort of sour they taste?"

"Thank you," said Maggie. "Seems to me they don't taste just like me mother's,

but I can't tell why. I put in butter and salt and a speck of sugar, just the way she does. I left out the pepper on purpose. I wonder *what* I forgot."

"Aurelia puts in something that bubbles when they are very sour," suggested Jack.

"I know," cried Helen. "It is sody."

"Sure," said Maggie, "I've see me mother do that same sometimes. Eat something else and I'll fetch some."

Soon she was back with half a cupful which she had taken from the can in her mother's kitchen. "Now," she announced, "we will each fix our own. Use just a speck at first."

It was great fun, putting in a tiny pinch and watching the bubbles rise in the stewed tomatoes where the soda had gone in. The stirring and tasting was also fun, and soon all but Jack were quite satisfied. He put in a little at a time for a while, and then, when nobody noticed him, stirred in a whole teaspoonful. Instantly there was a loud foaming, hissing sound, and the pink bubbles

began to run over onto the table. Jack sprang to his feet, upsetting the pumpkin upon which he had been sitting, and carried the cup a few feet away to overflow harmlessly upon the ground.

"Soda water!" he cried. "Tomato soda water! Five cents a glass! I never knew how soda water was made before."

"Oh, Jack!" exclaimed Maggie, "you've spoiled your tomatoes, and there's no more in the frying-pan."

"Uh-*uh*," said Jack, taking a swallow right from the cup. "It's just right. I like mine this way."

"Jack," said Helen, "why do you wrinkle up your face that way if you like it?"

"Bubbles tickled my nose," replied Jack. "Guess I'll wait till they're gone before I take any more."

But he never finished eating or drinking it, for when everything else was gone he declared that to eat more might make him ill.

Helen tasted it when she and Maggie

were clearing off the table. "Ow!" she cried," it tastes just like soapsuds!"

"Sh-h-h!" whispered Maggie. "Don't let on you know. He made believe like it, so I would n't feel badly. He 's just kind, that 's what he is. I 'm sorry I plague him sometimes."

CHAPTER IV.

SMOKING.

PROFESSOR Harding had much trouble that fall from his school-boys smoking. He himself never smoked, although many of his friends did. What he said was that no boy who attended the public school should smoke, if he could help it. What they did after being graduated from the high school was not his business; what they did before was.

Some of the tougher big boys stole tobacco from their fathers or bought cigarettes down town. These they lit occasionally in hidden corners of the school grounds, or in an old barn near by, swaggering around with the corners of their mouths drawn down and puffing vigorously.

Of course these same boys began to have poor recitations, and, also of course, many

of the smaller boys began to wish that they dared to do the same thing. So Ben Stuart and Sammy Robinson, and a lot of boys like them, began to roll cigarettes made of paper from their school tablets and filled with dried corn-silk, clover-tops, or string.

Most of them were lads whose parents paid very little attention to them, and who did about what they chose. They went around with their pockets filled with smoking materials, and nobody found it out, save the boys to whom they told their plans. One day Sammy told Patsy and Patsy told Jimmie, and that night after school they and Ben Stuart got together in an old barn near the Flannigan house to smoke string cigarettes.

Patsy had an idea that Mrs. Miller would not like any member of the Saturday Club to do such things, so he did not ask the Miller boys to come. Instead he talked to Ralph about "what some of the fellows are doing." Ralph said: "Let 'em, if they want to. I don't. Father said he'd be perfectly

willing to have Jack and me smoke real tobacco when he does, but that we ought to be willing to wait for him because he is the oldest. And we all shook hands on it that we would wait."

"When is he going to begin?" asked Patsy, who wanted Ralph to finish his story.

"Never," said Ralph. "That's the joke. We never thought to ask him until afterward. But I don't care. I'd rather use my money for something else, and so would Jack."

"Did he make you promise not to smoke string?" asked Patsy. "That doesn't cost anything."

"Naw!" said Ralph, who was in a hurry to get away. "No use. I don't want to smoke string anyhow."

Patsy said nothing more about it. He felt that he would not like Mr. Miller to know about his plans, however, for it made him feel somewhat sneaky. So he cautioned Jimmie not to "let on," and took him along to the barn. For a short time all went well.

The four boys rolled their cigarettes of string or clover-tops and puffed away in great style. To be sure their throats became rather hot and dry and their eyes smarted, but they pretended to be quite old and manly and talked of great things which they expected to do a few years later.

Then the matches gave out and Jimmie was told to go into the house to get some more.

"How 'll I manage it?" he said. "How many do you need, anyhow?"

"Oh, get us a handful," said Ben Stuart, answering the second question first.

"Go in the front way," advised Patsy. "Mother 'll be in the sitting-room with the baby. Then you go out into the kitchen, as if you were going to get a drink of water. Then grab the matches and scoot."

Jimmie obeyed. Mrs. Flannigan looked up from her sewing and asked him where Patsy was. He replied, "Oh, out back of the house somewhere," and passed through.

Ten minutes later, just as four fresh cigar-

ettes had been rolled and lighted, the Flannigan baby cried and had to be lifted from her cradle. Then Mrs. Flannigan saw the kitchen screen door standing open, and went to close it. On the floor lay two matches. The box on the shelf was open and several stuck out. Evidently somebody had helped himself in haste.

"Now *what*," said Mrs. Flannigan, "is that boy Jimmie up to? Is it bonfires, I wonder?"

She walked to the door again with the baby in her arms, and stood looking out. It was a beautiful, still October day and the street on which she lived was a quiet one. She heard no sound of leaf-gathering and saw no smoke. There was no smell of burning leaves. Perhaps if she had been busier she would not have thought so much about it, but she was just holding the baby until she should fall asleep again, and she was puzzled by the way in which Jimmie had run off with the matches. Besides, only a couple of weeks before, a fire had

been started in a shed down town, by boys who were playing with matches. As the baby dozed off again she heard laughter in the old barn. She laid the baby down, watched her a minute to be sure that she was sound asleep, and then went quietly out the back door and across the yard to the old barn. There was a narrow and dark passage-way between it and the henhouse, and into that she stepped. From there she could look through a crack without anybody's seeing her.

This was what she saw and heard. Ben sat on the seat of an old hay-rake which was stored there, his elbows on his knees and a clover-top cigarette between his teeth. "Yes siree," he was saying, "I've about decided to use tobacco after this. Sid Caxton knows where to get slick ones cheap, and he's going to tell me as soon's I get my pay for picking up potatoes."

Patsy removed his cigarette from his lips and said, "Aw, string's good enough for me. My money goes into the bank. I've

got seventeen dollars and forty cents now, and I 'm going to pick potatoes myself after this."

"So 'm I," said Jimmie, who seemed rather glad of an excuse to talk instead of smoking. "I have n't got as much saved up as Patsy, and I 'm bound to catch up with him if I can."

Sammy Robinson drew a match across the seat of his trousers. "My smoke 's gone out," he said. "Guess I did n't get it rolled right."

Mrs. Flannigan carefully tiptoed back to the house. After she left, a board which she had displaced slid down from its position against the barn and fell with a crash.

"What 's that?" cried Ben Stuart, starting from his seat. "You don't think——"

"Aw, sit down," said Patsy. "It 's the hens, most likely. Nobody ever comes out here." So the smoking went on in peace. At supper-time the other boys went home, and Patsy and Jimmie fed the hens and did their regular tasks before entering the

house. Nothing was said about their smelling smoky, and no questions were asked as to what they had been doing since school. They tended baby and helped with the dishes and were as good as—as good as—well, as good as boys usually are when they feel sneaky and are afraid of being found out.

When they started for school the next noon Mrs. Flannigan called them back. "Hurry home from school as fast as iver ye can to-night," said she. "It's a bit of a surprise I have for ye. Ye need n't bring any of the other fellows along. It's just for you."

Patsy and Jimmie were delighted. They wondered about it all the way to school. Patsy was sure it was something to eat. Jimmie was certain it was something to wear. "I'll bet you it's sweaters," he said, "sweaters or else shoes. I hope it ain't shoes if we'd have to wear 'em *now*. What month is it, Patsy? I've forgot."

"October," replied Patsy.

"Sure that's what I thought, but it

slipped my mind like. Well, October is too early for shoes onto me. I like to have my toes good and cool now and then."

"Me too," said Patsy, "but lots of the other fellows have 'em on now. Maggie says it 's time, too. Do you remember how she used to go barefoot? She 's quit it now. Says she 's too big. I believe I won't go barefoot next year."

"Oh, Patsy!" said Jimmie, and he had a hopeless feeling that his brother was growing up faster than he.

"Well," said Patsy, "I kind of hope it is shoes, yet maybe it ain't—I mean is n't."

Neither boy meant to tell what Mrs. Flannigan seemed to want kept as a secret, but you know how hard it is to keep still about surprises, and the more they thought about it the more sure they felt that it was something really fine which their mother had planned for them. So at recess each boy dropped a few hints to his friends, and regretted that he was not allowed to bring them home with him.

When school was dismissed they started toward home on the run, and some of the other boys, a little envious, shouted after them, "Look at the Flannigan kids leg it! Look at 'em! Look at 'em! Look at 'em!"

When they entered the front door they saw neither shoes nor sweaters. "Where is the 'sprise?" they cried.

"Wash your face and hands first," said their mother.

Such a splashing as followed at the kitchen sink! And then two warm and shiny-faced boys presented themselves at their mother's side, holding out their hands and turning them over and over for her to see how thorough they had been. Mrs. Flannigan almost lost her courage as she looked into their happy, freckled faces, but she remembered her talk with her husband, good hard-working James Flannigan, the night before, and she drew two pasteboard boxes out from under the overalls which she was patching.

"I didn't know till yesterday that ye

cared for these things," she said, "and your pa thinks that if ye're going to use 'em at all ye'd better do it at home, so now's your chance."

Patsy suspected at once what was in the boxes and would not open his. Jimmie lifted off the cover at once, and found matches, paper, white cotton cord, and clover-tops. He blushed until his freckles hardly showed. "Who let on?" he demanded fiercely.

"You did," said Mrs. Flannigan.

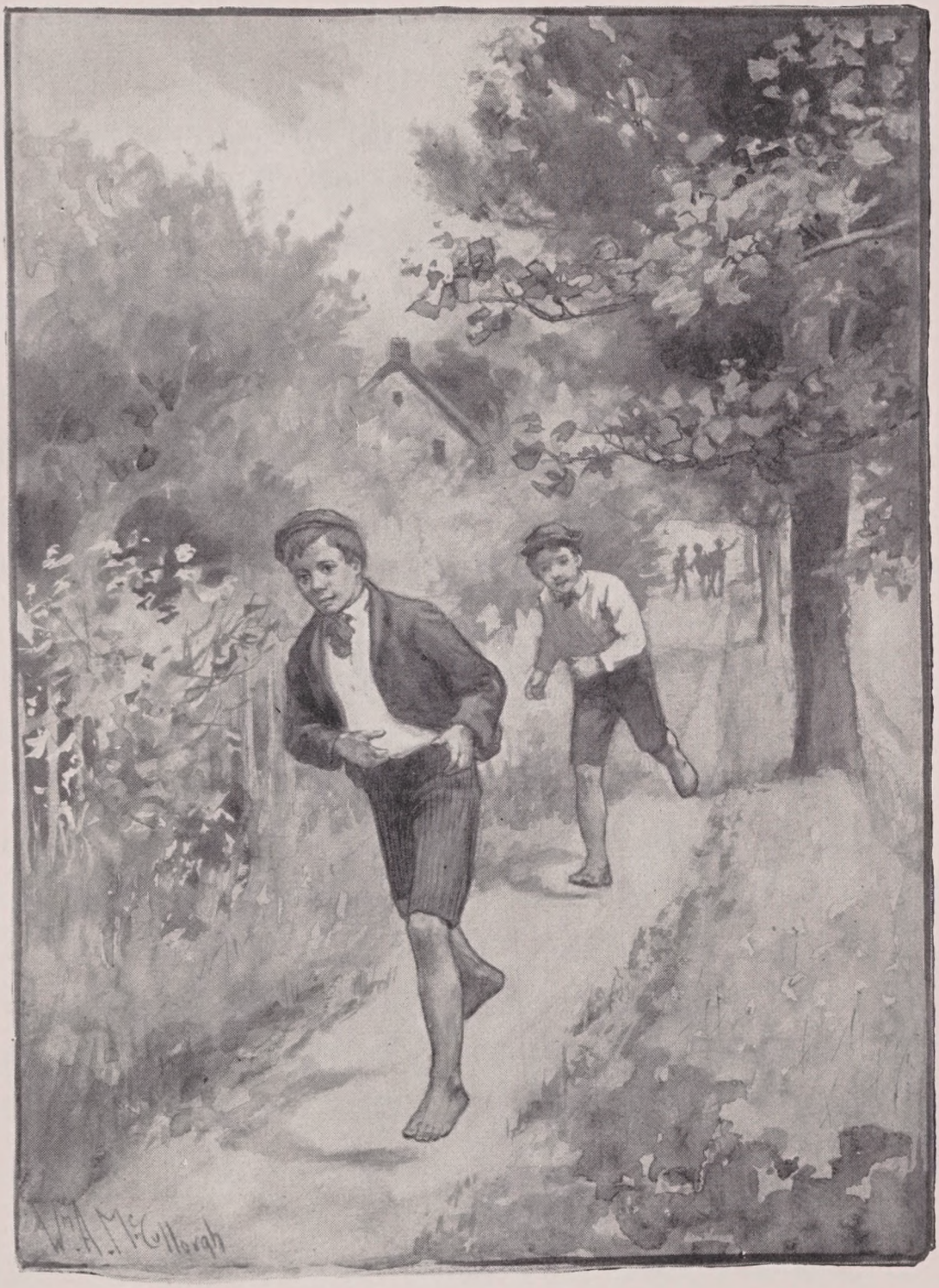
"When I was asleep?" he asked.

"No," said she. "When ye hurried to the barn yesterday and left a trail of matches. I followed out and saw what ye was up to."

Patsy was angry. "You never do pick up anything you drop," he grumbled, looking crossly at Jimmie.

"Get your own matches then next time," retorted Jimmie, "instead of sitting around and sending me to sneak 'em for you."

"There's sense for ye, Patsy," cried his



They started toward home on the run.

mother. "You just remember that *the next time.*"

"I expect you're going to lick us and tell us never to do it again," said Patsy, whose father did not smoke and would have no sympathy for him.

"Lick ye?" said good Mrs. Flannigan. "Well, thank goodness, I'm strong enough, if ye are big boys for your age, but that ain't me! Of course I spanked ye good and plenty when ye were little shavers, same as I'd throw stones at a hen or take the broom to our old cat. It did ye good, too, to my way of thinking. But I don't this time. What good would it do? Ye'd smoke no more in our barn, but ye'd hang around some other place that was worse. No, my men. If ye will smoke, smoke at home. Sit right down here in the parlor and light up. I've brought in the looking-glass from my room, and one from the kitchen, so ye can see just how grand ye look."

Jimmie scratched one ankle with the big toe of his other foot. "I don't want to

smoke to-day," he said. "Some of the fellows are going out to the pasture to see if the hazel nuts are ripe. I 'd ruther go with them. I can run and catch up."

"Not to-day," said Mrs. Flannigan. "Ye 'll sit right in that parlor with a looking-glass in front of ye, and smoke one hour—sixty minutes. And if ye think there 's any danger that won't last ye for a week or so, ye can smoke longer. That means you too, Patsy," she added.

"All right. I don't care," remarked Patsy. "*I* think it will be fine!"

Mrs. Flannigan said nothing. She took her sewing in her arms and moved her chair into the parlor. The boys rolled their cigarettes, lighted them, and puffed away. Jimmie was very meek. Patsy was defiant. Before long he began to talk. Mrs. Flannigan suggested that he might better give all his time to smoking, now that he had such a good chance.

Jimmie wriggled and cleared his throat

several times before saying, "May I go into the kitchen for a drink, please?"

Now the only clock in the house usually stood on the kitchen shelf and it never struck. Jimmie's mother suspected that he wanted to see the time, and she replied, "Here is some water in a glass. It will not be necessary for you to go."

Jimmie drank it all, as slowly as possible, and went on smoking. Then Patsy was thirsty and said he would wait on himself. Mrs. Flannigan said that she would get the water. After Patsy drank it he asked, "Did you look at the time. Isn't it pretty near an hour yet?"

"It is fifteen minutes," replied Mrs. Flannigan.

A couple of her friends were coming down the street. "May we stop if you have callers?" asked Patsy.

"No," said his mother.

"Not even if we finish up the hour afterward?" asked Patsy anxiously.

"No. Why should ye?" said she.

"They could stand the smoke for a little while. If you're ashamed of smoking, ye can quit for the rest of your life when the hour is up, but not before."

Then came a time of great anxiety. The boys could see the ladies walking slowly toward the house. They were certainly coming to call on Mrs. Flannigan, they thought. . . . No, they stood in front of the next house, chatting with Mrs. Flynn. Then they came on again. Jimmie was just ready to crawl under the couch, when—they passed by the door. The boys gave sighs of relief.

After a while it was half an hour. After another while—a very long while it seemed—it was three quarters of an hour. Then the clock tick-ticked from its place on the parlor table where Mrs. Flannigan had set it, and the boys watched its hands until they had almost reached the hour, when a voice said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Flannigan. Are the boys here?"

Ralph and Jack stood in the door-way, and

Ralph had hardly spoken when they saw Patsy and Jimmie.

"That they are," said Mrs. Flannigan heartily. "They 're just finishing their last cigarettes. Come in and wait for 'em."

The Miller boys waited, too surprised to laugh, even when they noticed the mirrors. In two minutes the Flannigan boys rose with a bound. "May I throw away the rest of this stuff?" Patsy asked meekly.

"No," said his mother. "Both of ye put the boxes on the mantel, where they 'll be right handy the next time ye feel like smoking."

Once outside, the Miller boys laughed, not in a mean way, but because they could n't help it.

"Say," said Patsy, "I 've quit smoking for good. "So 's Jimmie, have n't you, Jim?"

The younger boy nodded, cleared his throat, and said, "You bet."

"Now," continued Patsy, "what 'll you fellows take to keep your mouths shut?"

"That 's all right," said Ralph, speaking

for both himself and Jack. "We 're chums and we won't tell on you, but oh, fellows! if you could have seen how you looked!"

They were as good as their word, too. And when a sign appeared over the door of the playhouse they would not explain, even to Maggie, why it was put there. Perhaps Ralph suggested the sign, but Jack surely printed it, for it read:

NO SMOKING ALOUD.

CHAPTER V.

A WEDDING.

THE week after this the little Millers were very much puzzled. Aurelia was not ill. They asked her and she said that she was not. She was not cross. In fact they had never known her to be quite so agreeable. But she was different. Yes, that was it—she was very different. For instance, when Ralph asked her about some pieces of cloth for a kite-tail, she handed them to him and told him to "stir them well while they are cooking or else they will be lumpy."

"Stir what?" asked Ralph, thoroughly bewildered.

"Why, the paste for your kite," replied Aurelia. "Wa'nt that what you were talkin' about?"

"No," said Ralph, who had already stuffed

the rags into his pocket. It was the cloth for the tail. The kite is all made."

"Oh, rags!" said Aurelia, "I'll get you some."

"Why, Aurelia!" cried Ralph. "You did give them to me. They 're in my pocket."

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed Aurelia. "Where have my brains went to?"

Then she gave him a hug and told him to run away. "I 'm terrible drove with work this mornin'," she said, "an' I can't have you boys messin' around under foot." Ralph went, yet when he passed the kitchen door again, ten minutes later, Aurelia was still standing in the middle of the floor and smiling.

Both Jack and Helen found her acting queerly, and Helen declared that Aurelia stood ready to pour a dipperful of water into the range, as she went into the kitchen, while a stick of firewood lay in the sink.

At dinner-time there were no potatoes on the table. Mrs. Miller rang for Aurelia and reminded her of them.

"Sure enough," said Aurelia. "I must have left 'em in the warmin' oven," and she vanished into the kitchen. They heard her hurrying to and fro for several minutes and then she reappeared with her face very red. "I 'm dreadful sorry," she said, "an' I don't see how it ever happened, but I did n't cook 'em. I brought 'em up from the cellar all right, but I must have set 'em down in the wrong place an' forgot 'em."

"Never mind, Aurelia," said Mr. Miller, "we have enough without the potatoes. It really does not matter at all." And he went on carving without taking any more notice of her confusion.

Jack noticed it, though, and watched her out of the room. "Was n't her face red?" he said. "Mother, what is the matter with Aurelia to-day? She acts so queerly."

"I could n't say," replied his mother. "I think that she may have a good deal on her mind just now. You know that grown people all do at times."

"I 'm afraid she 's going to be some

crazy," said Helen solemnly. Would n't you think folks were crazy when they put water into the kitchen ranges?"

"No, no, my child," said Mr. Miller quickly. "I have done just such absurd things myself at times—but not lately. Now eat your dinners and be ready to start back to school on time."

When Mr. Miller and the children were gone and Aurelia's work was done, she came to the room where Mrs. Miller sat sewing and asked if she were too busy to talk.

"I 've had a lot on my mind this mornin'," she said, "an' I don't know but maybe I 've acted a little mite queer at times. That was what ailed the potatoes that they did n't get cooked this noon."

"I hope it is not trouble, Aurelia," remarked Mrs. Miller kindly.

"No, ma'am, it ain't that. Oh, no, it ain't that at all," said Aurelia, twisting the corner of her fresh white apron.

"Then perhaps it is happiness, Aurelia," said Mrs. Miller, as she bent over her work.

"I hope it is that. You know we are all very fond of you and want to see you happy."

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Miller," said Aurelia in a choked voice. "That 's just it. You are so good to me an' I 'm just clean broke up. You like my work all right, don't you?"

"Why, yes, Aurelia," said Mrs. Miller, quite alarmed, "has any one in the house been complaining? Have the children——"

"No, ma'am, "said Aurelia. "Don't never blame anything on to the children. I never *see* such good young ones in all my born days. Of course I know they 're sort of naughty sometimes, but what I mean is they 're always so good an' kind, an' never sassy to hired help, or anything of that sort." She stopped again and Mrs. Miller saw that she could not tell her perplexity unless somebody made her do so.

"Aurelia," she said, "*what* is the matter?"

"Matter enough," answered Aurelia gruffly. "Mr. Hathaway wants me to marry him!"

"Well, Aurelia! That 's very pleasant.

Mr. Miller thinks him an excellent man. I know he will make you happy," said Mrs. Miller. "Of course you have promised to, have n't you?

"No, ma'am. Not yet, that is," replied Aurelia. "Why, Mrs. Miller, I just can't leave you an' the children. I can't noways. If it wa' n't for that, I 'd marry him quicker 'n scat! But I 've tried an' tried to figger out how I could marry him an' stay with you, an' it simply can't be did." She hid her face in her apron.

"Now, Aurelia," said Mrs. Miller, "you stop crying. I am sure we can arrange it somehow. You see Mr. Miller and I thought that Mr. Hathaway loved you, and we have some plans half made. You have him come over to-night and we will plan together, but we won't talk about it any more now."

The next morning Mr. Miller asked the children how they would like to go to a wedding.

"Tin or crystal?" said Ralph. "Or is it wood?"

"Not an anniversary, my son," explained Mrs. Miller, "but a wedding."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jack. "The kind of wedding where folks get *married?*"

Mrs. Miller nodded.

"Course we'd like it," said the children. "Whose is it? Where's it going to be? What will we wear?"

"You will wear your very best clothing, and the wedding will be in this house, and the bride will be Aurelia!"

There was a shouting and a scrambling, and Mr. and Mrs. Miller were left alone, while in the kitchen three excited children jumped up and down, and hugged Aurelia, and shouted, "Wish you many happy returns!" Which, you know, was not at all what they should have said.

And after a while Aurelia had a chance to tell them of the plans made the night before. She was to marry Mr. Hathaway and live in his house, but would come over every day to work for the Millers, spending all her time at home after the work was

done. Then, when the new place was ready for the Millers, there would be a cosey little home for the Hathaways arranged upstairs over the building where the poultry and the new auto were to be kept. Mr. Hathaway was to work for Mr. Miller, clipping the grass, attending to the garden, and working down-town when there was nothing to be done around the house.

"And when is the wedding to be?" they asked.

"Well," said Aurelia, "your mother says it is to be Saturday evenin', an' she settles most everything around this place, so I'll have to be spry an' get ready, I s'pose."

"Say, Aurelia," said Jack, "won't you let us children all be bridesmaids?"

"Well," replied Aurelia, with her eyes twinkling, "it doesn't seem to me that you an' Ralph have got just the right style for bridesmaids, but we'll find some sort of job for you that evenin' so you won't feel left out."

"Children!" called their father. "Come and eat your breakfast."

It would be useless to try to describe the excitement of the next few days. It was the first wedding for the three little Millers, and they did quite as many foolish things as poor Aurelia had done on that day when she was trying to decide whether to marry or to stay with the Millers, never dreaming that she could do both. All other work was set aside that week. Mrs. Miller closed her desk as soon as she had written a dozen wedding invitations, and spent most of her time with Aurelia, helping in the kitchen, sewing in the upper hall, and planning, planning something all the time. Each child delivered four wedding invitations, and always stopped to tell the people all about it afterward. Once Helen ended her story by saying, "I fought Aurelia was going to be crazy, but it was only because she was so busy finking."

All the Flannigans were invited, and Mrs. Flynn and Maggie, and several other

families from their street who had known Aurelia for years and had lived close to Mr. Hathaway and his mother. Aurelia's sister came down from Binghamton, too, on Saturday morning.

It was a late fall, and cosmos and anemones were still in full bloom outside, so the house was trimmed with them and an arch of evergreen set up in the bay-window where the bride and groom were to stand.

All that the family had for supper that night was bread and milk, and they had to eat it from the kitchen table, too. But as they were almost too excited to eat, that did not matter in the least.

Then Mrs. Miller put on her best white gown and dressed Helen, while Aurelia's sister helped her into her white gown, and the boys struggled into their white duck suits, helping each other and occasionally calling on their father for assistance.

"Aurelia has helped us with a great many parties and good times," Mrs. Miller had said. "Now this is the best chance we shall ever

have to make a happy party for her, and *everything* must be *exactly* right. You must not forget that for a single minute."

And the little Millers had been much impressed and responded, "Yes, Mother!"

When the bell began to ring Ralph and Jack took turns in answering it and directing people where to remove their wraps. The boys wore flowers in their button-holes and looked remarkably clean. Indeed, they could hardly have helped looking so after the thorough scrubbing which both took.

After he had left the bath-room Ralph had inspected Jack and said, "Well, Jack, if it was for everyday, or even for church, I would n't say anything about it, but since it is for her wedding, I really think you ought to wash behind your ears again—for Aurelia's sake." And Jack, who usually disliked to wash there, went back cheerfully to do it over.

Mrs. Hathaway was there, very happy and looking decidedly handsome in her black dress. She sat in Mr. Miller's arm-chair near

the bay-window, and smiled on everybody. And Mr. Foster, the young minister, was there with his pretty little wife and their baby although the baby had never before been taken out in the evening. Now he sat on Mrs. Hathaway's lap and cooed and crowed as though weddings were the jolliest times he knew. (Of course you remember that it was Mrs. Foster who had brought Mrs. Hathaway and her son together after they had lost each other for so many years.) Maggie wore the brand new scarlet cashmere which her mother had finished for her only the night before. She had scarlet ribbons on her long braids and the boys wondered why they had not sooner realized how pretty she was.

Everybody laughed and talked, and when the last guests had removed their wraps Mrs. Miller whispered to the children and they stole softly up the back stairs with a message. A minute later Mr. Miller, who was standing by the front stairs, heard a whisper from above and said to Mrs. Miller,

"They are ready, Christine." And Mrs. Miller sat down to the piano and played the very same march which was played at her own wedding fifteen years before.

Mr. Foster stepped into the bay-window with a small black book in his hand; Mrs. Hathaway stood up beside Mr. Miller, who had quickly rolled the big chair out of her way; Maggie and the Flannigans gazed with round eyes at the staircase—and down came the little wedding procession.

First came Ralph and Jack, looking very solemn and somewhat fearful that they should not keep time with the music. Then followed Helen as a tiny maid of honor, and then Aurelia, leaning on Mr. Hathaway's arm and looking—yes, really—looking handsome, because she was so happy. They walked over to the bay-window and the boys stood on either side, while Helen was ready to take Aurelia's simple bouquet of cosmos when Mr. Hathaway put the wedding ring on her finger. It was all over very quickly and sweetly, and then everybody

came up to congratulate the groom and wish the bride happiness, Mr. Miller and Mrs. Hathaway first, then Mrs. Miller and Aurelia's sister, and then Helen and her brothers, and then everybody else.

Before long Aurelia's sister vanished into the kitchen, and soon Ralph and Jack were passing dishes of pink and white ice-cream, while Helen followed with the cake. The guests were seated around the dining-room and of course the refreshments were first passed to the bride. She took a dish of cream, looked at it unhappily for a minute, and put it back onto the tray.

"Sakes alive!" she said. "If my sister ain't gone to dishin' that cream out with a spoon! You boys take this cream to the children on the stairs, while I go an' get her the ice-cream. I won't be gone more 'n a minute, Fred. I know just where to lay my hands on it."

So the bride went into the kitchen and gave directions in the most matter-of-course way, returning in a few seconds to eat re-

freshments and visit with her friends. She did not forget the absent ones either, for she called Ralph aside and told him to see that pieces of both kinds of cake were put away for Lucinda, whose grandmother was so ill that neither could come to the wedding.

When the refreshments were eaten there was more visiting and looking at the presents, for Aurelia's friends had made the most of the chance to repay to her some of the kindness which she was always showing. And after that Mr. Flannigan sang a song for the company and Mrs. Miller played some lively music which set all the children dancing in a corner.

Then Mrs. Foster said they really must go, or the baby would be cross all Sunday, and Mr. Foster said that if he did not go home early he would get mixed in his sermon the next day. Mrs. Flynn and Maggie had to go, so the Flannigans walked along with them, and then all at once everybody had gone but the Hathaways, and Aurelia was helping the old lady into her

jacket while Mr. Hathaway was talking with Mr. Miller. When that was done, Aurelia stepped into the kitchen to give a few last directions to her sister, who was to take her place in the house for a few days, and then she kissed the children all around, took her husband's arm, and set off in the moonlight for her new home.

"It's all been the very nicest weddin' that ever was," she said. "I thank you a thousand times for all you have did for me, an' I'll be back to get breakfast for you Wednesday mornin' sure. I don't know when I've ever seen such a happy sort of weddin'. Good-bye."

"Good-bye!" they all shouted. "Good-bye, Aurelia Hathaway!"

The Millers turned from the moonlight outside to the rooms within, all bright with electricity. The scattered chairs, the evergreen arch, and the flowers looked almost too attractive to leave. They sunk into the nearest seats and talked about their good Aurelia, who had belonged to them ever

since the children could remember, and who had been with Mr. and Mrs. Miller from the day they were married. Everybody loved her and felt that she was the wife of a fine man.

The children began to wink slowly and sleepily and were started off to bed. Helen paused when half way up to the landing. "It was a nice wedding," she said. "I fink we did a pretty good job."

CHAPTER VI.

HALLOWE'EN.

IT chanced that Hallowe'en fell on Friday night this year, something for which everybody was glad. Mrs. Miller and several of her friends had agreed to allow their children to remain up a little later on Fridays than on other evenings, and as Hallowe'en was always an especially interesting time it was pleasant to have the two come together. All the children of the neighborhood were buying pumpkins a week ahead of time and planning pranks for the thirty-first, good-natured pranks that should neither scare nor hurt people.

But nobody dreamed what a wonderful Hallowe'en it was to be for the Saturday Club. The club was still a great success, although, now that its members were older

and had more other duties and pleasures, they met only once in two weeks. Professor Harding and Mrs. Miller shared the care of preparing the programs. Mr. Miller showed his interest in many useful ways, and once in a great while, when the weather was stormy and he could leave the store, he attended a meeting.

And now here was a letter addressed to the club and sent in care of Mrs. Miller. She opened it and read it aloud at the dinner-table on the day when it was received. It was from Mrs. Shaw, Lucinda's grandmother.

"DEAR MRS. MILLER:

Lucinda's been a real good girl to wait on me when I was sick, and she did n't make any fuss about missing Aurelia's wedding, although she thinks a sight of Aurelia, so I am going to have a party for her.

"I want all the Saturday Club boys and girls to come. John will be in town for them at half-past six, with the hay wagon and hay

in it. Let them bring their jack-lanterns along. Lucinda will ride in on the wagon and says she wishes Aurelia and her husband could come out too. I want to see what sort of man he is. Please fix that part of it for me. I will have a sort of picnic lunch for them and send them back at nine.

"Yours truly,

"JANE M. SHAW."

The children looked very sad. "Of course we can't go, because it will be so late," said Ralph, "but what fun it would be."

"Nine o'clock?" said Jack and shook his head. "I've never sat up so late in my life, 'cepting Christmas Eves."

Helen could not talk. She simply dropped her knife and fork and looked.

Mrs. Miller smiled. "I shall let you go," she said,. "but with this understanding, that by-and-by, when some other invitation to an evening party comes, you are not to tease and say, 'You ought to let us, because

we went to Lucinda's and that was late, too.'"

"We won't tease," promised the children eagerly.

"Really," said their father, "I am sure Mother is letting you go because it is both Hallowe'en and Friday, and that will not happen again for five or six years. It will be as long as that before it will be fair for you to say, 'We did then, so why may we not now?'"

"All right," said Ralph. "I 'll wait five years, anyhow, before I say anything of the sort. "Five years! Why, then I 'll be seventeen, won't I, and Jack fourteen, and Helen twelve. Why! I 'll be ready for college then, and like as not I can sit up till nine without asking! Dear me! I am growing old."

The news spread fast and Aurelia and Mr. Hathaway agreed to go out with the children. The jack-o'-lanterns were begun at once and put in a cool place as soon as finished. It really seemed as though every

child in the neighborhood came over to the playhouse with a pumpkin and a knife the day after the invitation was received. Maggie Flynn was the chief artist. When the owner of a pumpkin told her what sort of face he wanted, she took the point of her knife and scratched the outlines on the rind. You would not have thought that two eyes, one nose, and one mouth could be combined to make such a great variety of expressions.

"Make mine look like a Chinaman," begged Arthur Flemming. "I tried to fix one at home and spoiled it, so my father gave it to the cow to eat and let me take this."

"That 's easy," said Maggie. "Anyhow it is after you have done it once." And she sketched in eyes that slanted up at the outer corners. Arthur went to work to cut away the parts which she had marked.

Patsy would have no help. "Sure it 's none but Irish hands shall touch me purty Mickey," he said with a grin. "It 's a great

Maggie was the chief artist.

pity, that it is, that I can't tache him to talk the brogue I *used* to."

"Oh, Patsy," laughed Jack, "that's exactly the way you used to talk. When are you going to talk that way again?"

"Never except in fun," said Patsy soberly. "I'm not ashamed of it, and it's true I like the sound of it, but Professor Harding says that, since I was born in America and mean to go to college here, I'd be wise to leave off the brogue."

"Oh," said Jack mischievously, "it is just college, college, college with Patsy. I believe he dreams about it when he is asleep."

"That I do," admitted Patsy with a grin. "And it is mighty glad you will be to find *Mr.* Flannigan there to receive you when you come."

"Huh! I'd have Ralph anyhow," retorted Jack, for it was planned that all three boys should enter the college at Rockford, twenty-five miles away, where Professor Sinclair taught, the man whom Ralph and Jack had helped two years before.

"Ralph 'll be gone before you get over there, sonny," said Patsy. He 'll be off in some big city school fussing with engines, so you 'd better be good to your old friend Patsy."

"See here," said Maggie, who thought this had gone far enough, "these splinters will make elegant teeth for your lanterns. Who wants some?"

So college affairs were left to wait while the lanterns were finished. At the last minute Maggie wedged a couple of pebbles into the eyes of hers in such a way as to make it look cross-eyed. She cut away the inner part of the rind, too, in lines above the eyes, so that when the candle was lighted the thin places would show as eyebrows. Surely Maggie had quick wits and clever hands.

Friday night the good-natured John drew up in front of the Miller home with a "Whoa!" that might have been heard two blocks away. It was three minutes ahead of time, but every child was there on the walk, jack-o'-lantern and all. The horses

pranced and shied at the sight of all these bobbing, grinning faces, and John could not make them stand still.

"You fallers haf to but oudt dose shack-lanterns," he said. "Dese horses, dey yump so ven dey see him. Ven ve gedt oudt to Misses Shaw's, den you haf him lide oop some more."

You might think the children would have minded this, but they did not. There was so much else to delight them. There was Lucinda bouncing up and down in the wagon and calling out gay greeting to all her friends. There was the stout and good-natured Swedish driver, whom many of them had never seen before. And there were Mr. Miller and Mr. Hathaway, two strong, tall men, ready to help the boys and girls scramble into the high wagon and to pass their lanterns up to them. Mrs. Miller and Aurelia helped the children decide where to sit and how to stow away the precious lanterns. When all were seated, Aurelia and Mr. Hathaway climbed up beside the

driver and the load started. There was no moon, and John had a lantern fixed to the front of the wagon. That lighted the road ahead, and as to the children, the starlight was all they needed.

Such nonsense as they talked, happy nonsense, and usually good-natured. It sounded something like this: "I wish you 'd move along a little, my foot 's asleep." "I can't. I 'm squeezed right up against Dorothy's lantern now." "Say, Lucinda, how long will it take to get us there?" "Mrs. Miller *said* she thought it was about an hour's ride." "Jiminy! *Don't* the horses trot along, though!" "Where 's my shawl? I 've lost my shawl. Aurelia! My shawl has fallen out! Why-ee! I was sitting on it all the time and did n't know it." "I fink Berfa and I are getting pretty hungry already." And then Lucinda's clear voice saying: "I hope you will all be good and hungry. Grandma's let me have things just the way I wanted them and John has helped me, but we 're not going to tell."

"Oh *tell!*" everybody begged at once.

"No," said Lucinda.

Then came a general scramble to make her, and somebody stumbled over a jack-o'-lantern and somebody else over him until Aurelia interfered.

"Stop the team, John," she commanded. "Now every last one of you youngsters set right down where you was when we started, an' don't you budge till we get to Lucinda's. This ain't a trip for broken arms nor busted ribs, an' some of you 'll have 'em if you keep on that kind of foolin'."

Seventeen very meek children dropped into their places and stayed there. Aurelia told Mr. Hathaway to sing something and he started "Old John Brown had a little injun." John was greatly amused by the song, and by the time they turned in at Mrs. Shaw's big gate he was roaring at the top of his strong voice, "Vun liddle, two liddle, t'ree liddle inyun," and the children were beating time on the backs of their lanterns.

L. OF C.

Mrs. Shaw, with a shawl over her head, came out to welcome them, and they went into the parlor for a few minutes and sat around on the stiff haircloth furniture, while John was caring for the team.

"Seems as if you'd ought to have your lunch in here in the dining-room," began the old lady, who, you remember, was very deaf, "but Lucinda's fixed things just the way she wanted them, and I hope you'll like it. She'd read about it in a book, or heard tell of it somewhere."

"Oh, Grandma!" cried Lucinda, who entered the room at that minute. "You have n't told, have you? I wanted it all for a s'prise, and John's ready now, so we'll start."

"Told?" said Mrs. Shaw. "No, I have n't told what you're going to do. And I'm not strong enough to help much, but Aurelia will."

"Don't you want us to take off our things, Lucinda?" asked Rose Jacobs.

"No," said the little hostess. "I want

you to keep them on and come right onto the porch and light your lanterns. Here are the matches."

She led the way to the side porch, where all the lanterns sat in a row on the edge, and got her own ablaze in a minute. Patsy helped Helen, Ralph helped Bertha, and Ben Stuart and Sammy Robinson made themselves generally useful. The grown people stood in the door-way and watched, while Mrs. Shaw whispered to Aurelia the details of her little granddaughter's plan.

"Now," said Lucinda, "we are ready. Everybody follow me in single file. We are going to walk through Grandma's woods to the beach."

"Jiminy!" said Ralph. "Are you going ahead?"

"Of course," said Lucinda. "I 'm the one that knows the way, so I 'll have to."

"My," whispered Ben to Sammy, "she 's brave for a girl, is n't she?"

"Ralph says she is nine," replied Sammy, also in a whisper.

"Are n't you scared some?" said Bertha Clarke to her dearest friend, Helen.

"Scared? No!" replied Helen in great surprise. "I fink it 's lovely. My mother tells us lots about the woods at night and says when I am big I may go sometime with her and Father. I guess she 'll be 'sprised to know I 've been."

"I was n't scared either," declared Bertha. "I was just fooling." But she dropped back to where Aurelia and Mr. Hathaway walked behind the little procession.

On and on they went in the narrow foot-path, sometimes up and sometimes down, the dancing yellow rays from their lanterns lighting up the tree trunks and the brown-tipped brakes that grew beneath them. Once a party of weasels scampered under a log as they drew near, and several times they heard the rustling of birds in the branches, as they awakened and flew to a more quiet spot.

As they approached the shore of the lake, and heard the little waves lapping on the sand, two or three children cried, "Why,

there's a fire!" and sure enough there was. John had made a big one in the afternoon and covered the coals carefully before driving to town. On his return he had hurried ahead and thrown on dry wood, and now here was a cheerful blaze on the very spot where the little Millers had first met Lucinda. Around the fire was a large circle of boards, laid on blocks of wood, where the party could sit. The lanterns were set around on these boards between the children, and Lucinda began to pass around the lunch baskets. They had plenty of good sandwiches and hot cocoa (John had brought that down from the house), and then each child had half a dozen marsh-mallows to toast on the end of a long stick. The night was a very mild one for that time of the year, and the tall trees around the little cove where they were kept off the slight breeze.

"It makes me think of being a soldier and having a camp-fire," said Ben Stuart. "My, but I'd like to be one."

"Is this how the soldiers eat?" asked

Bertha Clarke. "And do they always have marsh-mallows, too?"

"Course not," replied Helen promptly. "They have to carry their food in their satchels and marsh-mallows would squash. My grandfather helped Mr. Grant when there was a war a while ago, and he told me all about it."

"Tell us, Helen," urged Ben Stuart, who thought it great fun to have her tell long stories.

"Well," said Helen, who was really quite a chatterbox when she had the invitation to talk, "it was about like this: The people who lived down south were not doing the way they had promised to and Mr. Lincoln said they must, and they said they would n't, and so he said, 'My soldiers shall *make* you.' And so he told Mr. Grant about it and invited some men to go and help Mr. Grant make them. And he invited my grandfather and my grandfather said, 'Thank you, I 'll be very happy to go.' So he went, and they foughted and foughted——"

"That word is *fought*, Helen," suggested Ralph softly.

"That 's what I said," replied Helen, quite loudly. "I said they foughted. I used to say 'fighted' till I got too big, and knew better. Yes, they foughted and foughted, and the people down south would not mind Mr. Lincoln, so he said 'I will make all your slaves free, *now* will you mind?' And the people down south said they would try. So they did, and my grandfather and Mr. Grant did n't fight any more, and my grandfather brought his gun home, and told us how brave the people were who lived down south and that it was too bad there had to be a war."

"Tell us another story, Helen," begged Sammy. "Tell us something you made up all yourself."

"All right," said Helen, "only I want to fink a little first. Well, once upon a time there was a naughty little skirl. He was a red skirl and lived right in these woods. He had a nice mamma and a nice papa and nice

little brothers, but he would play with other little skirls that were bad, and so he was bad, too, pretty soon. And his mamma scolded him and his papa spanked him, and he was saucy at them and imperdent. So his mamma sent him to bed without any supper, and in the night he waked up 'cause he was so hungry, and down near his tree he saw a fire with lots of people and some terrible *fings* sitting around it. And he fought the fings had come to eat him up 'cause he was such a bad little skirl, and he waked his mamma right up and promised her he would be good for always and always."

"And was he?" asked Sallie James, who had found the story very interesting.

"I can't tell that," said Helen gravely. "I *fink* he will be good, but you know he has only just promised her now, so I can't be sure."

"Oh, Helen," said Janice Field eagerly, "were the people really us?"

"'Course," answered Helen. "That's

how I happened to know about it. And the skirls live in that big tree just back of you. They 're looking at you now, only you can't see them."

The younger children stared in silence at the tree, and even the older ones turned their heads that way before they thought.

"I wonder what is looking at us," said Dorothy Flemming. "I suppose there aré lots of little creatures off there in the dark."

"Don't you like to feel sort of scared once in a while?" asked Jack.

Three or four of the older children nodded their heads. Ben Stuart said: "Pooh! I don't know how it feels to be scared. The only thing that could scare me would be a ghost, and there ain't any anyhow."

Just here John pulled out his big silver watch and held it close to the light of Arthur Flemming's lantern. "Vell, I guess ve got to go home," he announced. "Mrs. Shaw, she say we go home at nine o'clock."

There was a general groan, but everybody got up and Mr. Hathaway showed them

how to put out the fire by throwing damp sand on it, so that there would be no danger of a rising wind carrying a spark into the woods.

"I say," said Maggie, "let's let all the folks who don't like to feel scary go ahead with Aurelia and John, and let's the rest of us give them a good start and then go on and talk about ghosts and wild-cats and everything like that."

This plan brought out shouts of approval, and Rosa, Sallie, Bertha, Janice, and Helen went ahead with Aurelia, although Helen would really have preferred to remain behind.

Mr. Hathaway was just putting the last sand on the fire when he heard Ben Stuart and Sammy Robinson planning to scare the rest by walking behind them and then screaming when they were half way to the house. Mr. Hathaway smiled and decided that *he* would walk behind *them.*

They started off slowly enough with Lucinda ahead, and what stories they told!

Maggie was just finishing the story of Ichabod Crane and the headless horseman, when Mr. Hathaway saw Sammy nudge Ben, and heard him whisper, "In just a minute now." Ben nodded.

Just at that instant Mr. Hathaway, whom they had quite forgotten, laid a large hand on each boy's shoulder.

"Ow-w-w!" screamed Sammy. Ben dropped his lantern and ran. Mr. Hathaway picked it up.

"What 's the matter?" asked everybody at once. Perhaps they were not frightened, but,—well, they looked so. Ben came sneaking back.

"Guess I didn't burn my finger very badly, after all," said he, looking very hard at his left hand and reaching for his lantern. Maggie was suspicious. "Was it because you burned your finger that Sammy screamed?" she asked.

Ben did not answer. He was fussing with his candle.

"I — just—believe" said Maggie slowly,

"that—you—were—both—scared—stiff!"

"Come, come," urged Mr. Hathaway, "John will tire of waiting for us." He hurried them right along and there were no more ghost stories told. Ben and Sammy looked at him sharply, but he was perfectly grave. "I hope I did not startle you," he said to them later. "I was just going to suggest that you might better not scare the others."

"Guess we did it, all the same," said Sammy with a grin.

"Yup! Did it without half trying," added Ben.

Lucinda rode into town with them and they all had a good time. As they got farther and farther away from the dark woods, they began to talk about their fright. "Of course," they all said, "we weren't really scared, and it was such fun! Guess we 've had the best Hallowe'en of anybody in Winthrop."

CHAPTER VII.

LUCINDA.

FOR a fortnight after Hallowe'en, life was very quiet for the little Millers and their friends. Their father thought it was better so. "Dear me!" he had said, as he pinched Helen's cheek. "This child will grow old too fast if we let her go to weddings and evening parties at this rate, Mother. She will be like the little princess who had too many birthdays. We must reform." And he tried to look very stern, an effort that did not at all deceive his three children.

After about two weeks of quiet and contented work in school and home, Ralph, who was the restless one of the family, began to wish that something would happen. "I don't much care what," he said, "but something."

"Even something unpleasant?" asked his mother with a smile. "I find myself feeling in that way sometimes, and then I think how cosey and well and happy we all are, and I am afraid to wish for a change."

Ralph gave her a hug and a kiss, tucked a loose lock of hair back over her ear, and said, "Well, I think I can worry along for a while the way things are," laughed at himself, and was off.

It was only a couple of days after this that Mrs. Miller was called from the sitting-room after supper, to the telephone. It was so near that the children could hear what she said, and were startled to hear her exclaim, "Oh, that poor child! Certainly Aurelia can be spared for a few days."

When she returned there were tears in her eyes. "Children," she said, "Old Mrs. Shaw has died very suddenly, and the neighbors found a letter in her writing asking them to send at once for Aurelia if anything should happen to her. It seems that she feared this same illness which killed her."

The children sat motionless for a minute, then Helen cried aloud. Jack sniffed and began a frantic search for his handkerchief. Ralph sat bolt upright. "And I was the one who wished that something would happen and said I did n't care what. Mother, does God let bad things happen just because people talk that way?"

"No, dear," said Mrs. Miller. "I am sure it would not make the slightest difference with His great plans because one restless little boy said such a foolish thing." She gathered Helen up into her arms to comfort her, and went on to tell more of her thought about it. She was not the sort of person who preaches little sermons to all who are around her, but she was never afraid to talk to those she loved about her Heavenly Father.

"You see," she said, "Mrs. Shaw was old and feeble, and uncomfortable. She was so deaf that she could not hear the birds sing, or the waves lapping the shores of her beautiful farm She could not even understand

Lucinda, unless she spoke very loudly and close to her grandmother's ear. And Lucinda was all that she had to live for. She was tired. Aurelia says she has suffered all the time since she was so ill last month, and that the doctor said she could never be well again. We must be glad for her that she can rest and hear and be happy again. And we must be very good to Lucinda."

"Now," she added, as she gently slid Helen from her lap, "I wish you children would help me by sorting these papers while I am gone. If I am not back by half-past seven, go to bed alone. I'll return as soon as I can."

. . . . .

That was how the news came. Aurelia went out to the farm that very night, and remained there several days. When she returned Lucinda came with her and was left with the elder Mrs. Hathaway, while Aurelia came at once to Mrs. Miller.

"Oh, Mrs. Miller," she said, her words getting all mixed in her excitement, "what

do you suppose that old lady had been an' went an' did? She left Lucindy to me!"

"To support?" asked Mrs. Miller anxiously.

"No, ma'am," just to have for my own little girl. The lawyer says that, with the farm an' all, there 's plenty o' money to pay for Lucindy's keep an' give her a first-rate education, but she 'll need somebody to be a kind o' mother an' father to her. It seems the old lady made up her mind about me the time we was out there with the lanterns an' she saw Mr. Hathaway."

"And what does he think of it?" asked Mrs. Miller.

"Oh, he 's pleased as can be," said Aurelia. "He was terrible took up with Lucindy the first time he laid eyes on her. He says it 's most too good to be true that after livin' alone so many years, an' thinkin' his mother was dead, he should find her an' all of a sudden have a whole houseful of folks."

So it was very quickly settled and Lucinda became Aurelia's little girl. Of course she

was a sad and lonely child, but she was a brave one, and everybody was good to her. She lived in the tiny house on the back street and helped Grandma Hathaway, as she now called her, by washing dishes and dusting. Maggie almost always stopped for her on the way to school, and Helen was often waiting for them on the corner. After school she found Aurelia at home, and sometimes she went over with her when it was time to get supper, and stayed until the dishes were done, playing with the little Millers and eating supper, sometimes with them and sometimes with Aurelia in the kitchen. It was a great change from living with only a deaf old lady and the Swedish John, on a big farm. Lucinda missed her grandmother very much, and shed a few tears every day, but Lucinda enjoyed living in town. She was voted into the Saturday Club at its first meeting, and returned from school nearly every day with some little gift that a schoolmate had thrust into her hand or laid upon her desk.

Would you like to hear how Lucinda looked? She was now nine, you know, and perfectly well. She had dark auburn hair, which hung in two long braids down her back, large gray eyes, with long lashes, and a pleasant and rather grave face. When she smiled she had little dimples, but she did not laugh so much as Maggie and Helen. She smiled when she was pleased. Helen and Maggie smiled nearly all the time anyhow. Lucinda was just Jack's age, and they were great friends.

Somehow, with Lucinda's coming to town they began to make up new plays. She had been a lonely child, used to amusing herself without playmates, and so had come to devise all sorts of games, like being shipwrecked on a desert island, or being chased and almost caught by wolves, or carrying a lantern and picking her way through a storm to save a train from being wrecked. Now, with so many companions all around, it seemed possible to play almost anything. Out of doors it was usually tag, or hide-and-

seek, or something of that sort, but on rainy or stormy days, when Lucinda came over to the Miller playroom, such games were made up as no little Miller had ever thought of devising.

A theatrical troupe played *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Winthrop that year, and Mr. Miller took Lucinda with his own children. It was the first time that any of them had been to the theatre, and they sat on the front edges of their chairs and laughed and wept and exclaimed, as the old story was enacted before them. On the way home Lucinda whispered to Jack, "You just wait till the next stormy day. We'll act *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ourselves."

For once they really wished for a stormy day. You see it was a rule that they should use the playroom only in bad weather or on Sundays. At other times they must be out-of-doors.

About four days afterward the weather was bad enough for anybody. The children raced homeward in great glee, and clattered

joyfully up to the playroom. Jack had been told to keep on his rubber boots, because he was to be the cruel slave-owner Legree, and one could not be a good Legree without boots.

"Now," said Lucinda, "we must get dressed. Helen will have to be little Eva, because she is the smallest and her hair is the right color. Jack will be Mr. Legree and Ralph must be Uncle Tom. I 'll be Topsy. O dear! I just wish we had more children here. Maggie could be Miss Ophelia, you know, and the Flannigan boys could be Mr. St. Claire and that funny Mr. Marks, the lawyer. Can't one of you boys run over to get them?"

"It 's no use," said Ralph. "The boys have to stay a long time after school tonight, and Mrs. Flynn is sick, so Maggie has to help her iron."

"Who 'll be Eliza with the baby, and jump onto the ice and run away?" asked Jack. "I like that part. It is so exciting when the bloodhounds and the bad men

are after her and almost get her, but not quite."

"Perhaps I 'll be Eliza, too," said Lucinda. "I 'll be all blacked up, you know, so I can just as well."

"What 'll we do for the bloodhound?" asked Jack." "Would Nebuchadnezzar do?"

"We might try him," replied Lucinda doubtfully. "I don't know what sort of a bloodhound a cat would be."

"And Jack can be Marks, too," suggested Ralph. "He 'd have time when he was n't being Legree. He could take off his boots to be Marks, so it would always show which he was."

The principal parts were settled in this way and the actors began to dress. Little Eva's hair was unbraided and combed out and a night-dress put on over her dark frock. Jack got the mucilage bottle and stuck on an old false moustache. It was coal-black and looked rather queer with his straw-colored hair. At first it kept drop-

ping off, so he ended by holding it and putting his head over the register to dry the mucilage. After that it stayed on, although in holding it had become slightly twisted, so one end was somewhat higher than the other. That is to say, it stayed on for a while.

Lucinda and Ralph blacked each other's faces, Lucinda having found out that burned cork was the best thing to use and got some ready the day after they went to the theatre. They got it on very well, too. Lucinda would not have any on her neck and wrists for fear of soiling her dress, and that made the effect rather spotted, but Ralph had never yet spoiled a game for the sake of his clothing, so he blackened all the skin that showed, even working the cork up into his hair.

The actors who did not happen to be on the stage at any particular time sat down in front of it and were audience, the division between the stage and the bare floor being shown by a chalk mark on the bare floor.

The play was not presented *quite* as they had seen, some parts having been forgotten and others left out for lack of actors. Eva's teaching Uncle Tom to read came first.

Ralph, as the old slave, spelled d-o-g and c-a-t on his slate, and got them wrong and had to rub them out, until Eva became quite discouraged and said, "Now see here, Ralph—I mean Uncle Tom—don't you write 'cat' with a k again 'cause I 've said all the fings I can remember about Eva's saying, and it 's time Eliza was escaping, anyhow."

"Uh-uh," said one of the audience, "Mr. Legree has to buy Uncle Tom first and whip him."

"I don't remember which does really happen first," said his companion, "but I 'd just as lives let Legree have his turn first at acting, and then he can take off his boots and be all ready to be Marks, you know."

"All right," said Jack. "This 'll be my whip," and he picked up an old maple branch which had once been used for a signal flag.

Then followed a truly terrible scene, for the cruel Legree, in his rubber boots, strode up and down the stage and acted exceedingly cross, saying "Gosh!" or "Thunder!" nearly every time he turned around, and pretending to chew tobacco and spit. Poor old Uncle Tom, who had just been bought by Legree, said "Marster" a great many times, and was finally whipped until he fell down on the floor and howled.

Of course it was not real crying, any more than the whipping had been a real whipping, but it was such a good imitation that Aurelia, who had come over early to get supper, hurried upstairs to see what was the matter. When the door opened Uncle Tom raised his head from the floor and said, "It's all right, Aurelia. I'm only making believe, you know, because I'm being Uncle Tom." Then he flattened himself on the floor and shrieked again.

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed Aurelia. "An' that's what you youngsters call fun, is it? Well, it's all right, if you enjoy it, but I'd

ruther have my fun scrubbin' floors or cleanin' fish!" She closed the door and went back to the kitchen.

"You did that first-rate," declared Lucinda. "Ralph hollered lots louder than the theatre man did, and I like it better this way. Now I'll be Eliza."

Helen's biggest doll was hunted up to be the baby in Eliza's arms, and Nebuchadnezzar was brought up from a nap by the sitting-room fireplace. Lucinda gave directions to Ralph, who was to start him, and then climbed onto a chair at the left.

"This will be the river-bank," she said. "Now when I get half-way across the river on the ice (that's about as far as where Helen is sitting), you set Neb after me."

She balanced herself on the chair, held the doll tightly to her, wrapped in an old shawl, glanced fearfully over her shoulder, whispered, "They are pursuing me! They have the blood-hounds! My child, I must save you!" and jumped.

Nebuchadnezzar, who had been wriggling around in Ralph's arms, was now thrown gently after the frightened Eliza, but refused to chase her. Instead, as soon as he could get his balance and turn around, he bolted for the door and mewed pitifully to be let out. Jack climbed to the chair, or rather river-bank, from which Eliza had jumped, and made a great fuss because he had failed to catch her.

And now, after a short time spent in trying to comfort Nebuchadnezzar, the final act of the play was arranged. Little Eva was placed on the old couch, while Topsy knelt beside it. Jack, whose moustache had dropped off, decided to be Mr. St. Claire, the father of little Eva, and Ralph was put in hastily as another servant.

"You know," Lucinda said, "they had just a lot of people to end up with, and Uncle Tom is dead, so you can't be that. You just be any old negro you want to. And you must all cry like everything just as soon as little Eva dies."

"Do I cry, too?" Helen asked, sitting bolt upright again.

"No—no," answered Lucinda, hurriedly. "Now don't get all mussed up again. I had you all fixed. You must just whisper real loud, 'Good-bye, Papa. Good-bye, Topsy. Be a good girl.' And then you must shut your eyes and lie still while we cry."

It was done quite as they had planned it. The only difference was that just as little Eva closed her eyes, and the wailing began, Mrs. Miller returned from down-town with a dripping umbrella and an armful of parcels. She smiled and said to herself (for she had the habit of talking aloud when alone), "I suppose that is the play which they have been planning. I believe I 'll go up."

She turned the knob gently and opened the door while all the actors had their eyes closed or buried in their handkerchiefs. When Topsy remarked, "Well, I guess we 've cried long enough," they were surprised by hearty applause from the doorway.

"How long have you been there?" asked Ralph.

"Wasn't I a nice Eva?" demanded Helen.

"About one minute. First-rate," replied Mrs. Miller, answering both questions at once.

"We 'll play it all over for you, if you can stay up here," offered Lucinda.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Miller. "I 'd love to see it all, and I will sometime, but I am getting up a troupe of my own just now and shall present a play called 'Supper,' in about fifteen minutes. The actors in that play will be all white. Any of you who wish may have a part. The play will be presented in the dining-room. Good-bye!"

And she hurried down to remove her damp wraps.

"Is n't your mother funny?" exclaimed Lucinda. "Somehow she always says something that I did n't think she was going to."

"I know," agreed Ralph, "and somehow she never seems at all old to me. I kind of forget that she 's grown up. Come on, let 's get washed. Wish now that I had n't blacked my ears."

CHAPTER VIII.

GRANDPARENTS.

CHRISTMAS was coming, and every day now somebody would open the front door of the Miller home, with a warning, "Shut your eyes until I get past. Don't you look till I say you may, because I have a present you must n't see!"

The trunk-room, where the wrapping-paper and twine were kept, was a very popular place. Bureau drawers and closet shelves were laden with queerly shaped packages, all labelled with loving little messages. Joy was everywhere, and the best —the very best—part of it was that Grandfather and Grandmother were coming to spend Christmas in the Miller home.

It was exactly two years since they had been in Winthrop. In fact they had not

been there since you first knew Ralph and Jack and Helen, and it was the longest time that they had ever passed without seeing their grandchildren. Because they had set several other dates for coming and had been disappointed, Grandmother had not written positively about this visit until a week before Christmas. Surely you do not need to be told how the children felt. You know how you would feel if you had only two grandparents and had not seen them in two years, and then heard that they would be in your home in a week. Well, the little Millers felt exactly that way.

"There 's only one part I don't like about it," said Jack, "and that is their coming so soon. There are lots of things I want to get done first."

"Like what?" asked Helen.

"Oh, different things," replied Jack. "There 's our desk upstairs to be put in order, and our bookshelves, and my end of our closet, and then there are all my things in the playroom, and I 'd like to get some

of my toys mended, espeshually some that Grandfather gave me. And I wish I could find the knife Grandmother sent me before she gets here. And if we only could get our playhouse all covered with tar paper and a window put in it, perhaps Grandfather and Grandmother could come out and make candy or something with us there."

"Well, I guess I have my job to do," said Ralph regretfully. "I don't care so much about *things*, although of course I do want to slick up some, but Grandmother dislikes slang—even the very nicest slang there is—and I'll have to break myself of it in a hurry. Jiminy! I do sort of wish they would n't come quite so soon myself!"

"Humph!" said Helen. "I'd like them to be here right now. I wish they were down by the corner this minute."

"Why do you wish them down there?" asked Mrs. Miller, who had just come into the room."

"'Cause if they were out there, then

pretty soon they would be in here," replied Helen promptly.

"If here is where you want them to be, why don't you wish for them to be right here?" asked Ralph teasingly.

"*Because I would rather see them coming, and open the door to let them in,*" said Helen very decidedly, and nobody tried to tease her after that.

Jack was still worried for fear he should not be able to do all the little tasks which he had named. His mother assured him that there was time to do a great deal, and that if part were undone she was sure that the grandparents would still have a delightful time.

"But perhaps I'll forget some of the most important ones," said Jack, who was naturally fond of order and sometimes became a little fussy about it.

"Let me suggest," said his mother. "Make a list and put the most important items first. Put off fixing the playhouse until Grandfather is here. You know he is

very fond of such work, and he will show you and Ralph the best way to go about it. When you have time to work, do the first thing on the list and cross it off, then the next, and so on. You will manage it all right, I am sure."

"Funny list I'd have if I tried that with my slang," chuckled Ralph. "It would be 'Don't say Jiminy,' 'Don't say gosh-walloper,' 'Don't say gee,' and so on. And then, when I wanted to cross some of them off, the only way I could do would be to sit down and not say some of those things."

"And then," he added after a pause, "I suppose that after I'd crossed one off I'd probably say, 'Jiminy, but I'm glad to cross that off!' I believe that sometimes not doing things is harder than doing things."

"And the moral of that is—" began his mother, quoting from *Alice in Wonderland.*

"And the moral of that is," said Ralph with twinkling eyes, "'Go and wash my hands.'" And he ran away from a little

lecture that he thought he had reason to expect.

The days came and the days went. Every morning a new one began, and every evening another one ended. And when you come to think of it that is always the way with days, whether we want them to hurry or to go slowly. Jack made fine headway on his list and Ralph had at least got as far as correcting himself after using slang. Helen flew around in her usual happy and quiet way, always busy and full of plans. At last, the very day before Christmas, the children awakened with a shout, for at exactly fourteen minutes past twelve, if the train was on time, Grandfather and Grandmother would be at the station!

At eleven o'clock the children began preparations for meeting them. They hurried desperately, and then had to sit still half an hour, while their mother gave the rooms little touches here and there, and then rushed away to change her dress.

"Does n't she look happy, though?" said

Ralph. "I like to see her eyes shine that way."

"I asked her this morning if she was glad they were coming," remarked Helen, "and what do you fink she said? She said she was too happy to sleep last night. Did you know folks was ever too happy to sleep!"

"Come, children," called their mother's voice. "Ralph, tell Aurelia that we are going, and that if the train is late I will telephone her from the station. Jack, please put another stick of wood in the fireplace. Helen, please take my umbrella from the stand and open it outside. There! Now we are ready!"

The train was on time and the children were delighted. "Does it look good to you?" they asked their mother.

"Good?" said she. "I'd rather smell the smoke from that locomotive than the finest perfume in the world."

"Why?" said Helen.

"Wait until you have had to go without seeing your father and mother for two long

years," she replied. "Then you will know why. There they are!"

Grandfather was a plump and rosy old gentleman, with a white beard. Grandmother was tall also, and looked like Mother grown older and a trifle stouter. What lots of questions they asked—and answered—while Mr. Miller, who reached the station as the train did, was arranging to have their trunks sent up. From then until bedtime the questions and answers lasted. The children hardly wanted to go to the church for the Christmas Eve exercises, but finally went with Aurelia and Lucinda for an hour.

When they returned, the stockings were hung in the library, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven! Helen dumped the remaining candies from the tiny tarleton stocking sewed with red worsted, which she had received at the church, and hung it up in the eighth place for Nebuchadnezzar. "He might have a new ribbon for his neck, or a bell, or somefing," she said. "Anyhow, I don't want any of the family left out."

"What if some of the gifts won't go into a stocking?" said Grandfather.

"Pin 'em onto the toe," replied Jack.

"What if it is something you cannot pin?" asked Grandmother.

"Oh, an engine, or something like that?" asked Ralph. "Just put it down somewhere handy. Trust us to find our presents if they are anywhere on the place."

The children went to bed. The older people visited by the fire. Only once did any one break the children's promise not to ask more questions. Perhaps it was not really broken then, but Jack pattered to the head of the stairs and called, "Mother! Mother!"

"What is it?" said she.

"I wanted to tell you," said he, "I thought of another question, but I'm not going to ask it till morning."

"So did I," added Helen. "It's about somefing of Grandma's."

"All right," said their mother. "That is the better way. And if you think of any

more questions please do not even tell me that until morning."

You remember how the Millers always formed a line with the youngest ahead when they went in for their gifts? They did so again this year, and Helen carried Neb, who seemed wonderfully interested in his own stocking. Jack thought this very remarkable, until he saw him standing on his hind feet and trying to chew the toe of it. Then he discovered that it was the smell of a tiny package of raw meat which had so attracted him.

It would be impossible to tell of all the gifts that everybody had. The big clothes-basket was running over with papers and the little basket was full of string before half of them were undone. Grandmother had given each of the boys a chest of tools, and Helen a charming little tea-set of real china, with scarlet handles and gold lines. But no child had found any gift from Grandfather. There was a good deal of hunting around the rooms before anything was said,

and the dear old getleman's face was more smiling every minute. Finally Helen spoke. "Could n't you pin them onto the toes?" said she.

Grandfather shook his head. "It was too heavy," he said. "Besides it is just one gift for the three of you, and I could not fasten it to three stockings at once."

"Where is it?" demanded Ralph. "I can't wait any longer."

"You said that you could find it if it were anywhere on the place," replied Grandfather. "Now is your chance to prove it."

Ralph pouted his lips for a minute, but laughed and spoiled the pout. Jack said, "I believe he put it on the porch just to tease us," and darted to the front door. The shades had been down so that he could not see out.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"What is it? What is it?" cried Ralph and Helen, crowding up behind him.

There, right on the porch and tied to the railing, was the prettiest little gray burro

that any of them had ever seen. A saddle was on his back, a bridle was ready for a rider's hand, and tied onto the saddle with a bit of scarlet ribbon was a card which read, "Merry Christmas to the three little Millers from Grandfather."

"Oh, may I ride him?" asked Jack.

"I am the oldest," said Ralph meaningly.

"*I am ready,*" said Helen, who had quietly stepped back and slipped into her wraps while the others were staring.

"That is businesslike," exclaimed Grandfather. "Everybody believes in giving ladies the first turn, eh, boys?"

"Of course," said they heartily, and hurried to get on their own coats and caps. Billy was led down the steps and Helen seated astride of his back. Grandfather, who could not realize that Helen was so old, wanted to walk beside Billy and steady her, but she objected and rode slowly up and down the sidewalk in front of the house. "I like it," she said. "I like the feeling when he jiggles softly, and does n't

Helen rode slowly up and down the sidewalk.

it sound cute when he sets down his dear little feet!"

"I know what we 'll do this morning," exclaimed Ralph, as they went in to breakfast, after the last turn on Billy. "Let's take turns riding Billy when we go out with the baskets for poor people. And then—O Jack! This afternoon let 's ask Father if we may not use our new tools and make a little snow-plow for Billy to draw."

"Yes, sir, let 's!" agreed Jack.

Billy was kept going so much during the morning that at noon Mr. Miller insisted he should have a long rest in the barn. "He is not to be taken out again," he said, "until you have finished the snow-plow and are ready to use it. Then you may take him out for an hour, but after that I expect Helen to serve us tea from her new tea-set, and I advise you boys to fix up neatly and drink tea with the rest of us."

Scraps of lumber were hunted over, with Grandfather near to advise as to choice, and then the measuring, sawing, and hammer-

ing went on busily in that part of the cellar where Mr. Miller's work-bench stood. At four o'clock the snow-plow was done and had been carried up the outside cellar-way. Ralph and Jack went for Billy, but soon returned half crying. "There is n't any way of hitchin' him to it," Jack explained, "unless we tie it to his tail."

"Dear me! Dear me!" exclaimed his grandfather. "I 'll have to help you hitch up. I forgot that you boys are not used to horses. And I forgot to tell you where to look for the harness. Of course, I brought a harness, for you will need it when you hitch Billy to your sleds or to the lawn-mower on the new place."

"Oh, goody!" cried all the children together, and Helen added, "If all I 'd have to do would be to drive Billy, I b'lieve I could lawn some of the grass myself."

Now Billy was hitched to the plow and work began. Helen was allowed to snuggle down in the front corner of the triangular plow, while first one boy and then the

other stood behind her and drove. About two inches of snow had fallen since people had shovelled it away in the morning, and, after the Miller walk had been cleared, Billy was driven all around the neighborhood to show other people how the new plow worked.

"That is a good advertisement for the firm of 'R. and J. Miller, Doers of Odd Jobs,'" said Mr. James, as he looked at his nicely cleared walk. He had come out with his snow shovel just as the boys drove along. At that minute a bright idea struck Ralph.

"We would like the job of plowing off your snow every time it storms," he said, for Ralph and Jack still kept the position as errand-boys and general helpers for the neighborhood, which they had taken two years before.

"What are your terms?" asked Mr. James.

"I—I don't quite know," replied Ralph slowly. "Whoa, Billy. Would we charge

by the depth of the snow or by the length of your walk?"

"I should think by the length of the walk," said Mr. James. "The depth of the snow makes but very little difference when it is removed with a plow. With shovelling it is different."

"I tell you what," said Jack, who had been walking behind the plow, "we might do it for a penny a rod every time, and then if you wanted us to do any inside your yard you could measure that up too."

"That is fair," said Mr. James. "I'll count on you, then, every time, but I shall want it attended to early in the morning when it snows at night."

"Yes, sir," cried the boys. "G' 'long, Billy!" and they were as far along as Mr. Clarke's before they remembered to call back, "Thank you!"

"Tell you what," said Jack, "Let 's get up early to-morrow and hunt up some more customers."

"All right, sir," agreed Ralph.

"I wish I was a boy," said Helen. "No, I don't either, 'cause then I would n't have my tea-set. I fink I 'll go in now and get the tea ready. Mother said I could have some other fings to eat with it, too. Hello, Lucinda, come in with me and we will make the tea together."

Jack took Helen's place in the plow, but was soon standing beside Ralph as he drove. "Let 's each take one line," he said, "and go around among the trees and drifts in the garden."

With much shouting and singing they turned into their own garden. The whole family flocked to the door to see them and to call them in to tea. Billy was headed toward the front door.

"Hi! Hi! Hi!" cried Jack, waving his free arm in the air. "Make way for the wonderful 'R. and J. Miller, Doers of Odd ——'"

At that moment the point of the plow hit some hard object under the snow, which stopped it suddenly. Of course the boys plunged headlong into the drifts by which

they were surrounded. Four wildly waving legs were all that could be seen of R. and J. Miller. Billy stood patiently, moving only his long ears.

After a mighty floundering, the two boys came to sight. Ralph gathered up both reins. Jack brushed some of the snow from his neck and face and finished his sentence as though nothing had happened.

"Jobs," said he.

CHAPTER IX.

HELEN IS ILL.

HOW Helen took the cold nobody ever knew, and it was all the stranger because neither she nor her brothers were at all easily chilled. Every member of the family had a different idea as to how it happened, but, however it was, the little girl had a dreadful cold on her lungs and had to stay in bed downstairs in her mother's room.

"It is too bad that if this had to come it should be while you are here," Mrs. Miller had said to her father and mother.

"No," said her mother. "If it had to come I am glad that it was during our visit, since we can help you care for Helen."

As for the little girl herself, of course it was very hard to have a cough and a sore chest and to take bad-tasting medicine, and to have that cold and slippery thermometer

put under her tongue every little while to show whether she had more or less fever. But then there were some pleasant things about it, too, for Grandfather told her war stories and Grandmother taught her the deaf and dumb alphabet, so that she could spell out simple words on her fingers, when she was not allowed to talk.

Nebuchadnezzar used to stroll in every morning when the sunshine was streaming through the east windows and across her bed. He would stand a minute with his forepaws on the edge of the bed, make a few soft sounds way down in his throat, and then spring up beside her. After that he would wash himself all over, curl down, and take a nap.

Grandmother suggested that they should study Helen's spelling lessons at home, after she had learned to talk on her fingers. So Bertha Clarke brought in a list of the words every day, and Helen studied them until she could spell them all perfectly in the deaf-mute alphabet.

It was when she was well enough to be out of bed that she had to miss the big Sunday-school sleigh-ride, and that made her cry until her eyes were all red and her nose stuffy. "Oh, don't you fink it is too bad?" she said over and over again. "And there is n't a single little boy or girl sick but just me."

Mrs. Miller stroked her hair and wiped tears from her own eyes. "It is hard, I know," she said, "but it would not do for you to go."

"If it was next week I could, could n't I?" asked Helen.

"Why, yes, probably," said Mrs. Miller.

"But then," sobbed Helen, "it is n't next week, and when I 'm well there prob'ly won't be any sleigh-ride party. And sleigh-riding is the most fun of any sort of riding, 'less it is riding on a train."

"How would you like," said Grandfather, "to 'go a piece' with Grandmother and me when we leave here?"

"Go a piece?" asked Helen. "Why

may n't I walk way down to the station ?"

"I mean a piece on the cars," explained Grandfather. "You know we have to take the morning train to Rockford and wait there a few hours before taking the other train which will carry us east. You might go to Rockford with us and walk up to the college where your brothers are to be students. Then we could come back to the station and eat our luncheon together. Afterward I could put you on board your train before taking mine, and you could return to Winthrop alone.

"Mother !" said Helen in an excited whisper. "May I ?"

Mrs. Miller nodded. "If you are careful until then and keep on growing stronger."

"Give me more medicine right off," said Helen, "and if you fink it will make me any weller I 'd rather go right back to bed."

A minute later she said, "I just pity the children that have to go on a sleigh-ride instead. Oh, to fink, I am going to come home all alone !"

Grandfather and Grandmother laughed at the way in which Helen seemed to prefer the trip alone to the trip with them, but they remembered the time when they were alone and understood it all.

This is how it happened that, on the morning when Grandfather and Grandmother Gray were starting back to Massachusetts, an eager little girl, with yellow hair, jumped up and down on the platform beside them, and wished and wished that the train would hurry and get in a few minutes ahead of time. Ralph and Jack were already in school—poor boys! She felt sorry for them, although they had been very brave and said it was all right and that they were glad she was going. She grasped her little purse more tightly than ever, as she thought of them, for Mother had let her take twenty cents out of her toy bank that morning, on purpose to spend for them in Rockford.

Even while she was thinking of this she saw the train coming, and hurried toward

the track. She was so fearful lest they should be left. It seemed to take them so long to hug each other and say "Good-bye." And Father had to help Grandfather with his suit-case, and Mother was fixing Grandmother's veil. O dear! Helen was not going to wait any longer. She crowded toward the steps of the car.

"Better wait for your folks, little girl," said the man with the brass buttons, kindly.

"But they take so long," she remarked, anxiously.

"Don't you worry," he said. "We won't go off without 'em. Do you see them trunks on that truck? Them all has to be put on before we go."

Helen thought him exceedingly kind, although she wished he would not say "them trunks." And now Grandfather and Grandmother came and Father and Mother kissed her good-bye and wished her a pleasant journey—quite as though she were grown up and about to travel for days and days.

There was nothing very remarkable about the trip to Rockford, only, of course, when you are seven years old every railroad journey is very exciting. Grandfather let her hold her own ticket and give it to the conductor herself, and there was a fat baby in the seat ahead of her, who kept sprawling over backward and playing peek-a-boo. Besides, there was the interesting water-tank at the end of the car, where you pushed down on the shiny little handle, instead of turning a faucet, as at home. Grandmother let her take a little travelling-cup, one of the sort that shuts down into a tiny flat box, and go twice to the tank for a drink. She began to talk about being thirsty a third time, but Grandmother said that she thought two drinks should do for a one-hour trip, and that it certainly would not do for her to leave the window now, because they were almost in sight of Rockford.

The college buildings looked very big and grand to Helen. She could hardly realize that Ralph and Jack—and Patsy—would

ever go there to school. She wondered where Professor Sinclair's room was. He was the kind gentleman who had given her brothers their watches, and she wished she could see him.

Grandfather left the bags at the station, and they walked up to see the college. A lot of young men with pleasant faces and very small caps stood around the big doorway of one of the buildings.

"Are they all teachers, too?" whispered Helen.

"No, they are pupils," replied her grandfather.

"How can they be when they are so big?" asked Helen.

"People are never too old to learn, dearie," was the answer. "Ralph and Jack will be as old as that when they come here."

"Oh!" said Helen.

Then they went down-town and into the stores to spend Helen's money for her brothers. It was very hard to decide where there were so many delightful things for

sale—a whole storeful, in fact—and all for either five or ten cents. At last she bought a pin-tray and a small mug, each with a tiny picture of the college printed on it.

"I am glad that is settled," she said. "Don't you fink it is very hard work to fink when you don't know what to fink?"

"Always," said Grandfather gravely. "I have often noticed that myself."

So they turned toward the station and found seats by the window, where Helen could look out across the frozen river, and then Grandmother opened the lunch-box. Aurelia would not tell Helen what was in it, and it was almost like opening Christmas gifts to unwrap the little parcels which lay inside. Before they opened them Grandmother insisted that they should guess what each was, and—would you believe it?—Grandfather guessed wrong every single time! There were sandwiches and pickles and fruit and cake and a queer little jar of salad, out of which they helped themselves with tin spoons, until Grandfather discovered

that a sandwich made a very good plate for a small portion of salad.

"After you have eaten all the salad," he explained, "you can eat the plate. And that is a good thing too," he added, "because then there are less dishes to clear away and wash. Now think how much easier it would be for Aurelia if you would always eat your dishes at the end of a meal."

After luncheon they walked out on the long bridge across the river, and then they had to hurry back to be there when Helen's train came in. In fact, although they had time enough to settle her comfortably in a car-seat, with her purse and her ticket and the parcel for the boys, there was no time at all to cry about parting from Grandfather and Grandmother. She kissed them both and hugged them, and Grandmother said, "You blessed child!" and Grandfather used his handkerchief pretty hard and told her that she was "a comfort." Yes, there had also been time for him to speak to a couple

of tall and very dignified men who sat across the aisle, and then to tell her that in case she needed any help or advice she should ask them.

She had no need to do so, for the conductor had hardly taken her ticket when one of the gentlemen leaned over and asked if she would not sit with them. "Come over and chat with us," he said. "I am Colonel Rankin and this is my friend Major Brisben. We have been travelling all day and have had only each other for company. Let me see—I fear that the pleasant gentleman who entered the car with you forgot to mention your name. What are we to call you?"

"Why, Helen, of course," was the reply, "but the rest of it is Miller."

"Are you going far, little Miss Helen?" asked Major Brisben.

"Yes," said Helen with an air of great importance. "I am going home to Winthrop, and it takes more than an hour—two minutes more."

"That is quite a distance," said Colonel Rankin. "And are you travelling quite alone?"

"Yes indeed!" cried Helen. "I am seven, you know. It 's because I was sick and could n't go to the sleigh-ride."

"Ah!" said her new friends together.

"Yes," continued Helen. "My brothers went and I was sick in bed with a cough. And I cried because I could n't go. So Grandfather said that I could come a piece with him and Grandmother when they went back to Massachusetts. I went as far as Rockford. And we ate our dinner in the station. . . . May I look at that book?" she asked suddenly.

"Certainly," said Major Brisben, beside whom the magazine lay. "Here are some others. I wonder what sort of pictures you like best?"

"Well," was the quite unexpected reply, "I like that picture of *Dawn* by Reni the best of any I know."

"Picture of *what?*" said the astonished Colonel.

"By *whom?*" said the Major.

"Why, *Dawn*, by Guido Reni," answered Helen in the most matter-of-fact way. "There is a copy of it in Mr. Peters's Art Gallery. Have n't you ever seen a picture of it?" she asked in genuine surprise, for the little Millers had passed many happy Saturday mornings in the great rooms full of paintings which the wealthy Mr. Peters, of Winthrop, owned and kept open for other people to enjoy.

"Yes," replied the gentlemen, "we have seen it." And Colonel Rankin added, "I wonder why you like it so?"

"Oh," she answered, "I don't know all the why I like it. Mother says you hardly ever do. But the horses look strong and glad to go, and all the people in the picture look so well and happy. And then I like to think of all the folks down there in that village, who are just waking up and being glad to see the sun shining through the clouds, 'cause you know that 's what it all really means. The boys like it too."

"Does your mother like it?" asked Colonel Rankin, who had noticed Helen's telling what her mother had said.

"Yes" answered Helen, "she has a big photograph of it up in the library. She says it rests her to look at it. She gets pretty tired sometimes, you know, when she is writing a book."

"Ah," said Major Brisben, "so she writes books, does she? What sort of books?"

"Stories for children," said Helen. "I help her, and so do the boys."

"In what particular way?" said Major Brisben, pulling his moustache.

"By being good and not interrupting," replied Helen. "She says we are the *greatest* helps."

The Colonel laughed a little and stooped to pick up a fallen paper. "Tell me more about your brothers," he said.

"Ralph is twelve and Jack is nine," she said. "They 're going to college in Rockford, soon 's they 're old enough, and then Ralph is going to build engines, or something

like that, and Jack finks he may decide to write books. He says maybe he will write one this winter. . . . Mr. Peters has just got some new statues," she added, anxious that her new friends should understand how fine the Art Gallery really was.

"Is that so?" said the Major. "Any more new paintings, too?"

"About fifty," replied Helen," and what do you fink? He has another Bonheur!"

"What is there remarkable about that?" asked the Major.

"Why, they cost so much," said Helen, "and we always like them so. Jack says her animals look so *live* that he dars n't go past them alone when he was a little boy, for fear they would bite him or somefing."

"Tell us about the new statues," urged the Colonel.

"There are five," said Helen," Plato, Socrates, Goddess of Liberty, a nymph drinking dew out of a morning-glory, and Diana."

"Hum, who were they all?" asked the

Colonel. "I know about the Goddess of Liberty, but what about the rest?"

"I fink the nymph is too fat," remarked Helen honestly. "Plato and Socrates were very wise men who lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago."

"And Diana? Who was he?" said the Colonel.

"He?" said Helen, looking much disgusted. "Diana was n't a *man*!"

"Oh, a lady then?" asked the Colonel.

"No," said the small maiden. *"Don't you know* that she was the goddess of the chase?"

The train drew near Winthrop, where Mr. Miller was to be at the station. Major Brisben helped Helen into the cloak which she had removed. Colonel Rankin took a card from his card-case and asked Major Brisben for one of his. These he gave to Helen and said, "Convey our compliments to Mrs. Miller and tell her that we consider her a most excellent educator."

"At Winthrop he went with Helen from

the car, saw her safely to Mr. Miller, and, as the train moved out, stood out on the platform lifting his cap to Helen, while at the window Major Brisben did the same.

"Oh, Father," said Helen, "I have had the *loveliest* time!"

CHAPTER X.

CATCHING ON BOBS AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

WINTHROP was so small a place that on almost any sunshiny winter day, and especially on a Saturday, Main Street was lined with farmers' bob-sleighs, and on the roads leading to and from the railroad station such sleighs were constantly passing, either carrying grain, potatoes, and wool to ship away, or returning empty after having left their loads. The streets were never crowded, and, as the farmers were usually good-natured, the children had many a happy time catching onto bob-sleighs.

To be sure there was an accident once in a while, but that was always because the child was careless. When Maggie Flynn broke her leg two years before this, it was really her own fault, for she caught onto the

front of one side, and then, when the sleigh struck a rough place in the road, she was thrown under the back runners. The only safe place to catch on, you know, is at the very back end. Maggie had never "hopped a bob," as they called it, since, although she had quite recovered from the accident. All the boys of nine or over did, however, and some of the girls, the only rule being that they were to keep off Main Street.

One fine Saturday morning the Miller boys hurried through their tasks in the house, and came to where their mother sat patching a pair of trousers. "We have a favor to ask," said Ralph boldly. "We won't be cross if you say 'No,' only please think awhile and see if you can't say 'Yes' instead. We want to know if you won't be willing, just this once, to let us ride out into the country as much as two miles. I will wear my watch, and we will surely, *surely* be home in time for dinner."

"If we're not," added Jack, "we'll go without even a crumb."

Mrs. Miller basted half way around the patch.

"And you know we always catch onto the hind ends," said Ralph.

"And we always say, 'Give us leave?' to the driver first," added Jack.

Mrs. Miller finished her basting.

"And if we should get cold, we promise we will go to some farmhouse and get warm," said Ralph.

"And we'll be *very* polite about it," added Jack.

Mrs. Miller threaded another needle and took up her sewing again. "Yes," said she.

"You are positively the best mother in the whole wide world," said Ralph.

"And there never has been and never, never could be another one so sweet," said Jack, with a bear-like hug.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Miller, "I must be even more charming than I thought I was!" And they all laughed together, while the boys tugged away at their overcoats.

"Hurry up, Ralph," shouted Jack. "There comes one this minute!" And they were off as fast as their feet could carry them.

That was a morning of great happiness. It was the first time that either of them had been allowed to ride beyond the city limits on a bob, and it was one of those rare mornings when all of the trees were covered with long crystals of frost. Of course it was cold, but the sun shone brightly. Little by little the frost melted from the trees. Until it did, the boys thought it looked like fairyland.

In and out of town they rode, going a little farther out on each trip, until, by the time Jack found his toes aching with cold, they were just two miles from home. "It's no use," Jack said. "I *have* to get warm. Do you mind stopping, Ralph?"

"No," replied Ralph. "I was just thinking of it myself. Let's go in here."

"It does n't look like a very good house," objected Jack.

"The people may be just as good, though," said Ralph. "You can't tell all about the people by the size of the house. Come on! I see some children at the window."

They knocked at the front door, and it was opened by a tired-looking woman, with a baby on her arm and two little girls clinging to her skirts.

"May we come in to get warm, please?" said Ralph. "We won't make you any trouble."

"Certainly," said the woman, and her voice was very sweet. "Mamie, Jessie, get some seats for these boys."

The boys stepped inside, removing their caps. The little girls pushed forward a broken chair and an empty box. The woman opened the stove-door and threw in another piece of wood. It was part of the root of a pine stump. When she fed the fire, the woman had laid the baby in its cradle. Jack saw that the cradle was made from a soap-box, with rockers roughly cut from pieces of wood. He looked again at Mamie and

Jessie, and noticed that they were barefooted. Their mother had on an old pair of men's shoes. She stepped into another room for something, and Ralph nudged Jack in the ribs. "Don't stare," he whispered.

"I was n't," said Jack out loud. "You'd better watch yourself!" But he had no sooner spoken than he knew that he had been staring, and decided to make up for it by being especially polite, so he began talking to the little girls, asking them their ages.

"I'm seven," answered Mamie. "That is, I will be on my next birthday."

"Yes," said Jessie, "and she had a birthday yesterday. She was six then. I'm 'most five, and I'm big enough to help my mamma lots."

"What do you do?" asked Ralph. "Do you bring in the wood?"

"We used to, when we had shoes to wear," said Jessie. "Now we wipe dishes and tend baby."

"You see," Mamie explained, "Mamma

has to do it all now, 'cause she has some old shoes of our papa's to wear. We can't play out of doors now, but pretty soon it will be spring, and then we can."

"And p'r'aps," Jessie added, "our papa will be well again pretty soon, too, and send us some money so we can have shoes this winter."

Just here their mother came back. "My little girls have never gone barefooted in cold weather until now," she said. "Their father went north to work in the lumber-camps, and has been ill, so that he could not send us money as usual. It has been hard, but the children are brave, and he is growing stronger now. We shall manage to get along somehow."

The boys did not know exactly what to say, for they had been taught to be very careful about telling how much more they had than others, and feared seeming to put on airs.

"I had a nice birthday," said Mamie. "We had syrup on our mush for supper,

and I had my mamma's old doll to play with all day—the one she had when she was a little girl."

Ralph looked at Jack and Jack at Ralph. Both were thinking of their happy birthdays at home, with cakes and candles and birthday wishes. Jack wriggled around on his box and was very unhappy. Ralph had a good idea. He whispered to Jessie first and found out her last name, then he said: "Mrs. Smith, I wish you 'd let Jack and me bring you in a lot of wood before we go. We 're all warm now, and would like to, would n't we, Jack?"

"Yes," said Jack, rising. "Water, too, if you want some."

Mrs. Smith looked much pleased. "Thank you," she said. "You are good boys. I knew it when I first saw you. It will help me a great deal if you will fill my water-pail at the well, and bring a few armfuls of wood into the shed. There is plenty of it outside, but the shed is empty. If it is there, I can easily bring it in here when the box is

empty. Mr. Smith cut up a big pile of roots for us before he went north."

The boys took the pail and went out. "Ralph," said Jack, as soon as they were away from the house, "how do you feel inside of you?"

"I don't know," replied Ralph. "Why?"

"Well," answered Jack, "I feel sort of as though I 'd *bust* or something if I could n't get some shoes for Jessie and Mamie."

"Oh," said Ralph gravely," I feel sort of sick when I see them barefooted. Would you dare ask Mrs. Smith to let us bring out some of Helen's old clothing, if Mother 'll let us?"

"Yes," replied Jack fiercely, "I would! I just believe she 'd be glad to have old things, and she does n't talk like the kind that would be mad or think you were stuck up."

"All right," said Jack, "I 'll do it."

So, when a good pile of wood was stored in one corner of the shed, they filled the

pail and went into the house again. Ralph dreaded it, but he cleared his throat and said: "Mrs. Smith, we have a little sister at home who grows very fast, and sometimes our mother has good clothing of hers to give away. If she has any now, may we bring it out to the little girls?"

"And perhaps there 'd be shoes, too," added Jack.

The tears shone in Mrs. Smith's eyes as she sat down and drew her children to her. "I should be very thankful," she said, "only please be careful to explain to your mother that I did not ask for the things. I have never asked for help yet, but I will not refuse it when it is so kindly offered."

"We 'll tell her just how it was," promised the boys joyfully, and they called out their good-byes and hurried home.

Such a scene as there was when they got there! Both spoke at once, and Mrs. Miller and Helen could not understand what had happened until the mother made them take one-minute turns in talking. Then they

understood. "I have some things," Mrs. Miller said, "and surely there are more to be had in the neighborhood. You boys get clean for dinner and I will do some telephoning."

She found out a little more about the family from Mr. Miller, and then talked with all of her neighbors who had little girls. Every one of them promised to get a package ready as soon as dinner was eaten. At the table the whole family talked of the Smiths. Helen decided to hunt through her toys and find something to send. Mrs. Miller was sure that they could collect enough clothing to make the children comfortable, and said she would add a little for the mother. Jack begged to have six birthday candles put in for Mamie, because she had had none when she should have had them. Ralph began to fear that they could not carry out so large an amount of stuff.

"Let Billy carry it for you," suggested Mr. Miller. "If Billy is to be a member of this family, it is high time he began

to have a share in helping unfortunate people."

"Good scheme!" said Ralph.

"Dandy!" said Jack.

After dinner Mr. Miller looked at his watch, and then hurried around to fix Billy for his new task. He took a couple of grain-sacks, and fastened them to the saddle and to each other with very stout twine, one sack hanging on either side of Billy's furry gray body. "Now," he said, "you can drive Billy around from door to door and let people drop in their bundles. When you have collected them all, you might let Helen ride astride between the bags to see that nothing falls out."

That was exactly how they did it, and such a load as they got! Janice Field's outgrown aprons and underwear; Sallie James's red flannel dress that was too tight for her; Bertha Clarke's blue woolen gown and flannel petticoats; an old cloak of Rosa Jacobs's and another belonging to her mother, which could be made over; a warm

shawl that had once belonged to Rosa's grandmother; and five, actually five, pairs of children's shoes; besides more than a dozen pairs of warm stockings to be cut over for small feet.

Good Mrs. Flynn heard of the plan from Maggie, who was on the street when Billie made his first call. "The poor childer!" she said, wiping the steam from her forehead with the back of one soapy hand, as she straightened up from the wash-tub. "Sure, it 's no clothing at all we have to shpare, but we 've been too poor ourselves not to do something for them that is. Here, Maggie, darlint!" Take a couple o' bars o' soap out to drop into Billy's bags. Sure, soap is always handy, whether ye 're rich or poor, and more whin you 've got childer to look afther."

Maggie told Jimmie Flannigan while on her way back with the soap. Jimmie was coasting on the sidewalk, and told Patsy as soon as he reached the bottom. Patsy brought his sled around with a jerk. "Let 's see

what we can get," he said. Ten minutes later the Flannigan boys were hurrying after Billy, and waving an old dress-skirt of their mother's as they ran.

Mrs. Flannigan laughed as she looked after them. "I meant to wear it some more meself," she said, "but there! With James well and working steady, and the baby so good, I ought to be willing to give something." Then she looked at her fat and rosy baby, asleep in its pretty cradle, and went back to her dish-washing.

"Say, fellows," said Patsy, as he caught up with Billy and the little Millers, "Why can't Jimmie and me—I mean Jimmie and I—go along?"

"If you go, I will," said Maggie.

Ralph hesitated. "What 'll I tell Mrs. Smith if you do?" he asked.

"Aw, tell her it's just a couple of your friends out for some exercise," said Patsy.

"Exercise in some of her wood, then, will you?" demanded Ralph.

"I'll bring in as much as you will," agreed Patsy.

"So'll I," said Jimmie.

"I'll help," said Maggie, "and let's get Lucinda."

The others waited while she ran back for her friend, and Lucinda was soon hurrying out with a pair of warm mittens, which Grandma Hathaway had been knitting for herself but insisted upon sending to Mrs. Smith.

"Now we're ready," said Ralph. "Get up, Billy!"

Helen rode all the way out with Mrs. Flannigan's skirt spread over her knees and the full bags wobbling around on either side of her. The other children walked near her or rode on bobs, and they had a merry time. It was not the first time these children had helped the poor since that day two years before, when the young minister had led them down to Mrs. Hathaway's little garden. They liked it and were learning good ways of helping.

At the gate of the Smith place Helen and Billy waited for the rest. Helen could see Mamie and Jessie pressing their noses against the window, and thought of the little bare feet that she could not see. It was settled that Billy should be driven to the back door, and Ralph and Jack should knock and carry in the bags. The rest were to stay outside unless invited in.

Mrs. Smith opened the door quickly. "We brought out some shoes and things," said Ralph. "Where shall we put them?"

"Bless your kind little hearts! Bring them right in," replied Mrs. Smith. "And is this your sister? Have her come in and get warm."

Helen scrambled down and Ralph unfastened the bags. "The other children came along for exercise," explained Jack. "They thought they 'd enjoy bringing in some wood for you, but they 're not expecting to come into the house."

"Oh, have them come in," said Mrs. Smith. "They look like nice children."

"They are," said Jack quickly. "They are just as nice as we are."

So Patsy and Maggie and Jimmie and Lucinda came in also and tried hard not to stare as Mrs. Smith laughed and cried over the things which poured out from the two bags where Ralph and Jack emptied them upon the floor. The little girls pounced upon some shoes at once, and put them on without waiting for stockings, or to see whether they fitted.

It was very soon certain that the whole family could be made comfortable for the rest of the winter with what was there, and then the children from town went out to carry in pine roots. If you have ever carried any such firewood—and probably you have not—you know that you cannot pile it into neat armfuls, because the pieces are so crooked and queerly shaped. So each load had to be a light one, and Helen, with one piece in either hand, carried about as much as Patsy, who could manage only two or three pieces at a time.

Seven children going back and forth, like ants around an ant-hill, accomplished a great deal in a short time, and it was only about four o'clock when Mrs. Smith called them to come in and rest, The little girls had on shoes and stockings at last, and Mamie wore Sallie James's outgrown red flannel, while Jessie had on Bertha Clarke's blue gown. They had been freshly washed and combed, and looked pretty and happy.

Mrs. Smith gave the little girls a basket of apples, and told them to pass it to the others. "Take all you want," said she. "These grew on our own trees, and we have plenty of them."

They did. In fact there were only three left in the basket when they finished, and so many cores had been thrown into the stove that the room began to have the faint, sweet smell of burning apple.

"The apples were very nice," said Ralph, politely," and I don't know when I have enjoyed an afternoon so much."

"I hope your husband will be well soon,

ma'am," remarked Maggie, as they left. "Sure, it must be hard for you at home worrying about him."

"He is gaining," said Mrs. Smith, "and it will do him good to know the luck that has come to his home this day. Good-bye, and bless every one of you. Tell your mothers I say so, and may they be blessed, too."

The children had to walk all the way home, save as they took turns in riding Billy, for it grew late, and no farmers were going toward town. They were very tired when they reached home. "But I don't care, it paid!" said Ralph.

And somebody, several people, in fact, said—they should not have said anything so slangy, but they did say it—"You bet!"

CHAPTER XI.

JACK WRITES A STORY.

SOON after Billy carried the load of warm clothing to the Smiths, Jack lamed one ankle while skating. It was not a serious injury, but enough to keep him out of school and on the couch for two days. That was not so bad, all in all, for with his ankle bandaged and kept up he was fairly comfortable. The worst part of it, for him, was the fact that Mrs. Miller had to be so busy with writing a new book. It had always been her custom to begin her book as soon as the Christmas excitement was well over and the children settled down in school, but this year it had to be put off on account of the visit from her parents, and now her publisher was in a hurry for the story to be done.

"It is too bad, dear," she said, "but I have to be busy at my desk until school is out in the afternoon. I will put your books and playthings, and whatever you want, on the table beside your couch, and then, when you have to be waited on, Aurelia will come at your call. After my day's writing is done I will sit by you and sew."

"I wonder what I 'll do," said Jack. "I tell you what," he added, "I 'll write a story myself, and draw the pictures to it. Not a big enough story for a whole book, but just a story."

"I have a blank book in which you might write it," suggested Mrs. Miller. "Sometimes they make a little book out of a short story. Then you could keep it on your book-shelves and it would grow more precious to you every year."

"I will do that," agreed Jack, "and then when I have a little boy he 'll like to read the book his father wrote. That is, the first book his father wrote. I think that prob'ly when I grow up I 'll write them

pretty often. When I am not busy with other things, you know, just write a book or two."

"Well," said Mrs. Miller, bending over and kissing the top of his head, "if you do write books, I hope that your little boy will be as good about not interrupting as my boys have always been."

"You just get me the things," said Jack, "and I promise I won't ask you a single question this morning. Do you s'pose Aurelia could help me a little on spelling sometimes?"

"I would not ask her," advised Mrs. Miller. "You know she never had much chance to go to school when she was a girl. Do as well as you can with the spelling alone."

So, when Ralph and Helen started off for school, the two authors began their work. To Mrs. Miller it was all very familiar. In two minutes after she had closed the library doors behind her she was scribbling away as fast as her pen could fly. It was not so

with Jack. For a long time he lay there and puzzled over a name. He wanted something that would look well on the outside of the book. He knew that some books had short names, and he printed "ROBERT" in big letters on a sheet of paper, to see how that would do. Then he thought that it did not tell enough of the story inside, so he took another sheet and tried, "How Robert Russell Saved a Man from Being Drownded in a River."

That was so long that the printing had to be very fine. He tried again, and that time was quite satisfied. He put it on the outside of the little sheepskin-covered blank-book at once, and held it at arm's length to see how it looked. "Almost Drownded," was the title.

"Now to begin the story," said Jack. "I've heard Mother say that some folks begin a story sort of in the middle and tell something exciting before they tell who it is about, but she says she doesn't like that way. I guess I'll tell them about

Robert first, and then what he did afterward."

So the story was begun. The little author had frequent rests, in which he looked at pictures or played with the cat, yet, chapter by chapter, the story grew, and at the end of his second day on the couch he displayed it to his family. This is how it read:

ALMOST DROWNDED.

CHAPTER 1.—ROBERT.

The hero of this book's name was Robert Russell. He was nine years old, and had black eyes and curly hair. It was black to. His peepel were very poor. They lived beside a river. Often they had no food except the fish that Robert caught and the wild beries that his sister picked. His sister's name was Mary. His mother was very sick. And his father drank whisky and was often intocksickated. Then he would beet Robert.

CHAPTER 2.—SHE DIES.

One night Robert's mother was very sick and it was stormy. He went for the docter and told Mary to give her some sage tea. His father was drunk some more. The docter came. His mother laid cold and still. Alass said the docter she will never be alive again on this erth she is dead. Robert's sister berst out crying. But Robert comforted her.

CHAPTER 3.—HE WAS DRUNK.

Robert's father was intocksited now and swore something dredful. He said Robert must go and get him some more whisky but Robert said never so he beet him and then went to get his own whisky. His way lay across the raleroad tract, and a train came along just then and ran over him and killed him so he was dead to.

CHAPTER 4.—A LOAN IN THE WORLD.

Robert was now an orfun and had his little sister to take care of. Every morning

he would split the wood and help her get breakfast and catch some fish. The growsir gave them crackers and things and said you are a good boy Robert. Robert said thank you sir and I will do urrands for you. They had hens and laid eggs too.

CHAPTER 5.—A LUCKY FIND.

One day when Robert was digging bate to go fishing his shuvel struck something hard. Aha said Robert I must have hit a tin can. It was a toemaytoe can full of money. Robert took it to the growsir and said I will take this back to the oner. The growsir said the oner must be dead. Robert said I will ask the minnister. So he asked him and he said it must have been berried by robbers long ago perhaps Captin Kid it will be all right for you to keep it my little man. So he did.

CHAPTER 6.—SPENDING THE MONEY.

Robert put $2.00 into the contribushun plate next Sunday and then got him a new

sute with long trowsirs and a vest. He got Mary a blue dress with red bows on it. Then he said we will buy a popcorn stand and ern lots of money but Mary said how about school and he said we will mannage somehow. But when he went to bed that night in his poor bed on the floor he said o how aloan I am I am very much aloan.

CHAPTER 7.—ROBERT HEARS SOMETHING.

The next day Robert was fishing by his house and heard a splash a ways off. He lissened and he heard a man's voyse say help help I am drowning.

CHAPTER 8.—ROBERT RESKEWS HIM.

Robert took off his coat and he was bearfoot anyhow. He stood his pole up by the shed and took care of his bate then he plunged into the icy water. A man was in the river on the other side. He swam across the current which was swift and pulled him out by his hair. He was uncon-

chus. So he called Mary to help ressussitaight him and they did. Then Mary gave him some coughy that they had left from brekfast.

CHAPTER 9.—GRATITOOD

When he had drank the coughey he said you have saved my life. I am the ritch Mr. George Herbert Montague what can I do for you? Robert modestly said o that is all right. Mr. Montague said no my nobbel boy I will show my gratitood where is your father? Dead sir said Robert. And your mother said Mr. Montague Dead to said Robert with a sob. Alass my poor child said he.

CHAPTER 10.—ROBERT IS ADDOPTED.

I will addopt you said Mr. Montague and you shall live in my house and be ritch. O sir said Robert I cannot leave my little sister. What said Mr. Montague is this sweet child your sister? Then he said I need a little

girl very much and I will take her to. Thank you sir said Robert.

CHAPTER 11.—THE JURNY.

Mr. Montague said hurry up to catch the train so they put on their best clothes and gave the house to the kind growsir. Robert shed a tear on leaving the river but Mr. Montague said don't the fish near my house beets these and you shall have a jointed pole. Then he got some crackerjack of the newsboy and they reached their new home. It was grand.

CHAPTER 12.—RITCHES.

The house was made of brick and had a fowntin in front with an iron negro boy by the drive to hold horses. Roberts room was all pink and had a punching bag in it besides. Mary's was blue and she had dolls gaylower. At dinner they had pink ice cream and rost turkey two helpings. They went to ride in an aughto afterward and Robert steared it.

CHAPTER 13.—THE END.

Robert is now a man of 40 and very ritch. His bennyfackter is dead but Robert lives there. He is married but very happy. So is Mary. Sometimes they talk of the time when they were poor and Robert says it seems like a dream that is all.

* * * * *

It was almost time for the children to return from school, on the second day of Jack's confinement, when he finished the thirteenth chapter with a sigh of relief.

"Done?" asked Mrs. Miller, as she came in from the library and stood by the couch. "I am done, too, for to-day, but I shall have to begin again to-morrow, while you will be trotting off to school."

"Don't, Mother," begged Jack earnestly. "It's too hard work. I would n't, if I were you. I did n't know how hard it was, till I wrote a book myself. Father can earn money enough down-town for

the family, can't he? And then you can play more."

Mrs. Miller laughed at him and pinched his cheeks, and declared that she would not know how to live without her work, and that she really enjoyed it, even if she did sometimes become tired. "It is not only for the money," she explained, "but because I think it a shame for people to be idle just because they do not have to work. There is so much good I can do, too, with a little extra money. No, on the whole I like my work and I do not want to give it up. All I ask is a chance to play for a while when I am tired."

"Play now," urged Jack. "I'll play with you. Or may be," he added slowly, "you'd rather play out of doors."

"I am going to push the couch over here by the window," said Mrs. Miller, "and then I shall swing my Indian clubs on the porch, where you can see me. Next I shall have a game of checkers with you, and then, as soon as the other children are here to keep

you company, I am going for a long walk."

Twenty minutes later she was hurrying down the street, while Ralph, Helen, Lucinda, Maggie, and the Flannigans were sitting in a group by the fireplace and listening to Jack's story, as he read it aloud to them. They thought it very remarkable.

"I couldn't have done any better myself," admitted Ralph, "unless maybe about some of the spelling."

"That 's just because I wouldn't interrupt Mother," explained Jack. "I can spell all right every time, if somebody 'll only tell me how."

"I wish you 'd write a book for me sometime," said Helen, admiringly.

"I will," promised Jack. "I 'll write you a better one than this, only I 'd rather wait till I 'm a little more grown-up, so it won't make me so tired. I declare," he added, "when I was a little fellow, I never had an idea what hard work it is to write books. But I like it, though."

"I tell you what," said Lucinda—"I 've

thought of it before, but now I am sure we can do it—let 's get up a play, all of our very own, and have it in the barn when warm weather comes. Then we can make folks pay to come to see us act, and it 'll be *more* fun! When we did *Uncle Tom's Cabin* one of us would have to be too many folks, and it sort of mixed us up, but we could have this different."

"Do you mean to write it all out on paper first?" asked Jack doubtfully. "That would be lots of work."

"Sure, no," said Maggie. "Just sort of plan it out like and write that much down, the way they do on show-bills, and tell the big things that are going to happen. Then we can sort of talk it over about the things we are going to say on the stage."

"I could do that," agreed Jack. "I could write a play easier 'n anything that way. I 'd call it 'The Robbers,' and make it just *fierce*."

"I wonder if I could fix up some scenery for it?" said Lucinda. "I 'd like to try. If

Aurelia would let us have some bluing, I could make an elegant water scene."

"I 'll help," said Ralph, "and there 's some old green paint down cellar. I believe Father 'll let us have it for trees."

"I know how to make a dandy dark lantern out of a tomato can," said Patsy. "If you 're going to have robbers you must have a dark lantern."

"Let me be a rich lady in the play," said Maggie. "Me mother has an old table-cover I just know she 'll let me take for a train. Let 's surely do it as soon as the weather is warm enough."

"Yes sir," said all the rest. "Let 's!"

CHAPTER XII.

EASTER EGGS.

"MISS MARGARET B. FLYNN requests the pleasure of your company on Saturday afternoon, at three o'clock, in her home."

Such were the notes that Maggie handed to half a dozen of her most intimate friends, late in March that year. "You 'd better open it," she usually remarked as she delivered a note. "It 's an invitation to my party. I 've been getting ready for it this long time, and me mother says you 're not to come dressed up, and you 'd better bring along an old apron anyhow."

"Why?" asked Ralph the minute she finished telling him this.

"That 's a secret," said Maggie, running

away. I 'm not going to tell. You 'll find out when you come."

"I believe I will find out," said Ralph, under his breath, for Ralph was very inquisitive. "I believe it 's a taffy-pull."

He teased and coaxed and coaxed and teased, and once even threatened not to come unless he were told, but not a hint would Maggie give as to why they were to bring old aprons.

"Not much!" Maggie would say, with a toss of her head. "You 're the fellow that said there was n't a girl living who could keep a secret. So you may just tease and tease and tease and tease, Ralph Miller, but no more will you get out of Maggie Flynn!" And she was as good as her word.

Ralph called it foolish, and fussed about it a good deal, but he had a higher opinion of Maggie, nevertheless. The children discussed it at the dinner-table on the important Saturday, and Mrs. Miller's eyes twinkled. "You know," exclaimed Ralph. "Tell me!"

"I have a very strong suspicion as to what it is," she admitted, "but, dear me! I would n't think of telling, for fear you might say I could n't keep a secret!"

Then Ralph gave up. He pouted a little, and thought it was pretty tough when a fellow's own mother went back on him, but he comforted himself by getting ready ahead of the others and being the first guest to knock at the Flynns' front door. There was a sound of scrambling inside, and he heard Maggie say, "My dress is all buttoned," before she opened the door to welcome him.

The little parlor, with its red and green carpet, was spotlessly clean, and Mrs. Flynn sat in the big chair and visited with her daughter's guests as they came. She wore her black serge dress, with a white apron and the large brooch which Maggie's father had given her when they were married.

"Sure it 's a foine day for Maggie's bit av a party," she said, "an' 't is a foine Ayster we 'll be havin', I 'm thinkin'."

Maggie made some little sign to her mother, who nodded back, and then vanished into the kitchen. When she returned she was carrying a big basket of eggs. Patsy sprang to his feet. "Let me carry those!" he exclaimed. "They 're too heavy for —— whew! Jiminy! What makes 'em so light?"

"They 're empty," said Maggie, laughing at the look on his face.

"Empty?" said Helen. "How can they be empty? Did n't the hens put any inside to them?'

"Bet you they 're blown," cried Jimmie. "Yes sir, that 's what they are!"

"It must have taken a long time to blow all of those," said Lucinda. "Grandma used to let me blow some once in a while, and it was slow work."

"Oh, I know now!" cried Ralph. "We 're going to dye eggs!"

"Maggie kept the saycret, did n't she?" said Mrs. Flynn. "Poor choild! It 's been burnin' on the tip av her toongue many a toime."

"Now," said Maggie, "we are each to take twelve eggs, and then we are to go into the kitchen with our aprons on and dye them. Then they can dry while we are playing and eating supper, so that when you go home you can carry them in paper bags."

Good Mrs. Flynn had everything ready in the kitchen, and such a time as they had! There were three kettles of dye-stuff into which they put their eggs, and besides these there were tiny embossed pictures of birds and flowers which were to be stuck on as the children chose. There were little gilt stars, too, with which to cover over openings in the ends of the eggs.

Maggie had another plan, also, of her own devising. She had some tiny initials cut from white paper, and stuck these very lightly on the side of an egg. Then she dipped a small, stiff brush in colouring matter and rubbed it over a sieve just above the egg. Of course the paper kept the spatters off from that part of the shell which it cov-

ered, and when it was removed there were white letters on a speckled background. As soon as she had shown them how to do this, all the other children were eager to try it.

Such trouble as they had in cutting out their own initials! At last Lucinda and Maggie cut them for the crowd, for Lucinda had the ability of an artist, and Maggie's fingers were quick and deft. Finally all the eggs were done and drying. The kitchen had to be tidied before Mrs. Flynn could prepare supper, and she waved her gingham apron at the children and drove them out like a flock of chickens.

"Whish! Shoo! Scat! Get along wid yez," she cried, as one after another ran back for a last peep at the eggs. "It's no supper at all yez will be havin' if I have to get it wid yez dodgin' under me fate. Clare out now! Clare out!"

The children fled laughingly before her, and heard her slide the bolt as she closed the door into the parlor. They were all washed now, and carried their aprons into

the bedroom to lie beside their wraps. After they had looked at the photographs in the big album, Patsy suggested that they play "Rabbit."

"I never thought of it before," he said, "but it would be a good Easter game, because, you know, we always say that the rabbit lays the Easter eggs."

"What do we do first?" asked Jack.

"I'll tell you," replied Patsy. "First we will all get down on our knees in a circle and put our hands on the floor in front of us."

The children did as he said, Helen giggling because they looked so funny in that position.

"Now," said Patsy, "I will ask a question of the one at my right, and he will answer it. Then he will ask it of the one at his right, and so on. Do you want to play 'Rabbit'?" he said to Maggie, who was next to him.

"Yes," replied Maggie. Then she repeated the question to Ralph, who was beyond her. When that question had been

asked all around, Patsy started another. "How do you play 'Rabbit'?" said he.

Each person replied, "I do not know," and passed the question on, until Jack, who was at his left, asked Patsy, "How do you play 'Rabbit'?"

"I do not know," said Patsy, gravely. "Don't let's play 'Rabbit' then," he added.

The other children did not understand the joke so quickly as Maggie. "Oh, you rascal," she said, "to come to my party and fool us all so! You made me get carpet lint all over my new red dress that I wore to Aurelia's wedding!"

She picked up the stove poker and pretended that she was going to punish Patsy with it, but he fled out of the front door for safety. As quick as a flash, Maggie turned the key on him, and then they all stood laughing under their breath to hear what he would say when he discovered the trick played on him.

While they were still waiting, Mrs. Flynn opened the door into the kitchen. "Coom

out to supper now," she said, "the whole bunch av yez. Maggie, you show 'em where to sit."

They went, and there, at one end of the dining-table (the Flynns always ate in the kitchen) sat Patsy, who had slipped around the outside way and reached the back door, while they still thought him standing by the front one. "Come right up and take your places," he said, cordially. "There's plenty for all, and I'm waiting for you."

Of course nobody stopped then to talk about the game of "Rabbit." Instead, as it happened, they ate rabbit, for Mrs. Flynn had made a fine rabbit pot-pie for supper, and that, with plenty of good brown bread and butter, fine apple-sauce, made from the apples which all had helped to gather the fall before, and some little frosted cakes, made the supper.

The guests remained until it was quite dark, and then started joyfully homeward, with their precious paper bags full of colored eggs. It is not known exactly how the

other children managed, but the three little Millers got theirs into the house without being seen. Aurelia had already gone home for the night, and they saw Mrs. Miller, with her mending-basket, in the sitting-room. The boys carried the three bags around to the side door and sneaked them up-stairs, while Helen went in at the front one and kept Mrs. Miller talking.

That was the end of that day, for it was already a trifle past their early bedtime. The next morning, however, found all three children up ahead of their parents and having a most mysterious visit with Aurelia in the kitchen. Before it was over Ralph slipped out to the barn and returned with a double handful of Billy's hay. Aurelia set out five soup-plates, and in these they made tiny nests of hay and filled them with the bright eggs. It was a great question how to get one ready for Aurelia without her knowing it. Jack took an extra soup-plate from the china-closet, and then, while Aurelia was setting the dining-table, the

children hurriedly made another nest and filled it with eggs.

This they concealed in the low cupboard where the preserving kettles were kept, feeling sure that Aurelia would not go there unless asked to do so. The other nests were placed, one in front of each chair, on the breakfast-table. "Now," said Jack, "we are all ready. Aurelia, you *surely* won't let Father and Mother come out here ahead of time, will you?"

"Surely," said Aurelia. "Truly, truly, black and bluely. Lay me down and cut me in twoly." Then the little Millers felt quite safe, for that was thought to be even more binding than when one said, "Across my heart."

The time seemed very long while they where waiting. Ralph went to the piano and played the simple air which is used as morning bugle-call in the army, the reveille. "I can't get 'em up, I can't get 'em up, I can't get 'em up in the morning!" he sang.

At last everybody was ready for breakfast,

and Aurelia struck the chimes to call them out. The children tried to act as though nothing unusual were to happen. Mr. Miller was talking as they walked together toward the dining-room. "It looks to me," he was saying, "as though the weather to-day would be exactly right for —— why! What do I see? I must put on my eyeglasses! Where are they? Dear me, I am so excited that I cannot find them! Christine! Tell me, what are those beautiful bright-colored objects by my place?"

Mrs. Miller, who was examining hers with quiet little exclamations of pleasure, said, "Eggs, Herbert, Easter eggs!" And the children, dancing around and clapping their hands, shouted wildly, "Easter eggs! Easter eggs! Easter eggs! Ain't you s'prised though?"

There was more excitement when Mr. Miller remarked that it seemed almost a pity to open and eat such beautiful things, and the children, for a panicky moment, feared that he had broken one. There was

another surprise at the breakfast-table, for, as you know, the Millers always made much of all holidays. This surprise was brought in by Aurelia and set down between Mrs. Miller and the hyacinths in the middle of the table. It was a dish which Mr. Miller had bought on his last trip out of town, a covered dish for holding eggs. It was shaped and colored to represent a hen sitting on her nest in a round basket. To remove the cover and take out the boiled eggs inside, one took hold of the hen and lifted her off.

"My Easter gift to the family," said Mr. Miller.

"How pretty and quaint," exclaimed Mrs. Miller.

"I wonder where Aurelia had that hidden when we were in the kitchen," said Ralph.

"I fink," said Helen, "that the hen looks pretty much like Limpy."

"She certainly does," agreed Mr. Miller, who, like all the rest of the family, had

pleasant memories of Lucinda's pet hen on the farm. "Perhaps if she stood up she would not resemble her so much, for, you know, Limpy had one lame leg. Shall I make her stand, so that we can see?"

He reached one hand toward the dish, as though about to try it.

"Oh no, Father," said Ralph, always ready to carry on a joke, "you should not scare a setting hen. She might quit the nest for good, you know."

"I believe you are right, Ralph," said Mr. Miller gravely. "On second thought I will let her be until she chooses to get up and walk off. Then we can tell."

Now the children told in whispers what they had planned for Aurelia and asked Mrs. Miller to help them make her find her eggs. "Just call her in real sort of carelessly," suggested Jack, "and then make some excuse about her going where they are."

"You can do it, can't you?" asked Ralph anxiously. "Just say, 'Aurelia, I wish you

would look at those preserving kettles and be sure that they are all right,' or something like that."

"I 'll try," replied his mother. "Aurelia," she said, when that good woman answered the bell, "I wish you would see whether I left my diamond ring in the kitchen. I laid it down out there the other day. Look in the cupboard where the preserving kettles are."

The little Millers peeped through the crack of the pantry door. Aurelia went to the cupboard and drew out a nestful of eggs. A card was in it which read, "To Aurelia."

"Sakes alive!" she said. "Now ain't those fine! I wish I owned the hen that lays 'em like that. She beats any breed o' hens I ever kep'. Wonder how she got in here anyhow?"

"We 're the hens, Aurelia," cried Helen, unable to keep still any longer. "Don't you fink we are pretty big ones?"

"Land sakes!" said Aurelia, making a

quick turn and hugging them all together in her apron. "You 're bigger 'n Plymouth Rocks, an' a heap nicer. Thank you all, and wish you joyous Easter. Now run back and get your breakfast ate, so I can do my dishes."

After their morning tasks were done, the children had their usual hunt for tiny candy eggs, which were hidden around the house. Then they dressed and went to church, a happy little group, chattering softly on the way about all the little frolics of Saturday and Sunday.

Ralph turned around to his parents. "Would n't you call this a most *surprising* time of the year?" he asked, for he enjoyed puns.

"Egg-zactly," said Mr. Miller.

"Egg-ceedingly," added Mrs. Miller.

CHAPTER XIII.

HIGH WATER.

IF Winthrop had been a river town there is no telling what might have happened that spring, for the heavy snow melted rapidly and it rained for three days in succession. On Wednesday all the little Millers came home from school with wet feet, having had to go through puddles which came above their rubbers. On Thursday they started off in three pairs of shiny new rubber boots, and went through the puddles on purpose. On Friday they found it wise to carry long sticks, with which to measure the depth of puddles before stepping into them. On Saturday the rain stopped and the sun shone, and everywhere were broad pools reflecting the blue sky overhead.

That morning Ralph crawled out of bed with

only one eye open, and looked through the window. "Goody!" he cried, and flung his pillow over onto Jack's small iron bedstead, where it landed squarely on Jack's face. Jack sat bolt upright at once, and fired back the pillow with great vigor and very sleepy aim.

"Quit!" he cried. Don't you know any better than to——why are you hurrying so?"

"Look out the window 'n' you 'll see," replied Ralph, pulling on his clothing with great jerks.

"Fire?" asked Jack.

"Uh–*uh!* Water!" replied Ralph. "See that wooden walk all afloat out there? 'F I get dressed in time, I 'm going out there 'n' jump up 'n' down on it before breakfast, 'n' see the water come up through the cracks when it goes down. It 'll squash up just dandy!"

"Me too!" cried Jack, now quite wide awake, and bursting a button off his pajamas in his haste.

Alas for their hopes! The breakfast bell rang just as they were drawing on their rub-

ber boots, and after breakfast they had their regular tasks to do before playing. Even then, however, they were on the porch and ready for a frolic at a quarter after eight. Mr. and Mrs. Miller stood there with them.

"Now, Mother," Jack said, "you must tell us exactly what we must not do, because it really seems to me that there are such lots of jolly things to do that some of them *must* be wicked!"

Mrs. Miller laughed. "You *must* not do anything to spoil property or to annoy people," she said, "and you *must* not go around in wet clothing. That is all. Now be happy and help the other children to be."

"After a little, they tired of jouncing up and down on the floating sidewalk, and devised a new plan. Aurelia let them have the clothes-line, and they fastened one end of it to the railing of the back porch, and the other to the top rail of the back fence. Then they took an old mortar-box, which had been used by the builders, and made a ferry-boat of it. This they intended to run back

and forth over part of the garden, which was low ground and covered in places by at least two feet of water.

"This is the way they used to run ferry-boats across rivers," said Ralph. "I read about it in some book or other. They had a stout cable across the stream, and then they—then they—well, I don't know just how they did manage it, and it seems to me that there was a horse about it, somehow. And there used to be one of that sort a while ago, down near Washington or somewhere."

"Huh!" said Jack. "Guess I can talk about things, too. Used to be something like this somewhere or other, some time or other, only it was n't exactly like it either!"

Ralph pouted a little, but he knew that he need not complain, for his readiness to give information on all possible subjects was already a joke in the family.

"I can show you how we 'll work this all right," he said, springing into the mortar-

box and catching hold of the rope. He stood in the middle of the box and braced his feet far apart. Then he caught hold of the rope, pulled, and, as the box moved slowly through the water, caught hold again farther on, and pulled. The box moved faster and faster, and at last reached the back fence in fine style, fetching up with a bump that made Ralph stagger.

"It 's my turn, now," called Jack, as loudly as though he had been hallooing across a real river, and a wide one at that. Ralph started back at once.

"I fink ladies ought to have first chances on ferry-boats," remarked Helen, "and that is what I am, you know."

"Give her the next turn, Jack," said Ralph. "She really ought to have it."

"Humph! Why did n't you think about that sooner?" demanded Jack, with a good deal of spunk. "You took your turn without even saying, 'May I?' and now you tell me to give Helen my turn because she is a girl. I like that!"

Helen's eyes began to fill with tears. She was not used to hearing her brothers talk in this way, but she was soon comforted.

"I didn't think," said Ralph, apologetically. "It was my invention, and I wanted to how it see worked. That was all. I guess inventors usually do go on first trips, don't they? Robert Fulton went along on the first trip of his little steamer, the *Clermont*."

"He took some friends along, though," added Helen, who was quite familiar with the story of that first steamboat.

"He had to go, because it was dangerous," suggested Jack. "People thought it was going to bust or explode or blow up or something, and he ought to be willing to risk it on his own invention if he expected other people to."

Helen looked at the mortar-box rather anxiously. "There is n't anyfing about this to igsplode, is there?" she asked.

Then they all laughed, and Jack said that she should have the next turn anyhow,

because she was so funny. Ralph offered to give up his next one, but she would not take it, so all were happy again.

For a while they took turns going to the fence and back. Then they thought it would be great fun if they could all be over there at once, and as it would safely carry only one at a time, Jack hunted up another rope, and Ralph drove a big nail into the end of the ferry-boat. When this was done the rope was fastened to it, and each child pulled himself over in the old way, climbed onto the fence, and roosted there like a chicken, while the ferry-boat was pulled back to the porch by means of the second rope.

After they tired of that, and began to find the top rail of the porch an uncomfortable seat, they tied the boat to the fence and began climbing over the big woodpile beside it. The long rain had soaked up all the mosses and lichens on the beech sticks, and they made collections of the prettiest bits, piling them up in their handkerchiefs. A strong wind was blowing, and they had to

guard their mosses carefully to prevent their being carried off into the pool. Meanwhile, the same wind had been pushing and pushing at the loosely-tied ferry-boat, and slowly slipping the loop of rope off from the fence. Then the boat drifted away from both fence and woodpile until it was stopped by a couple of small fruit-trees. There is no telling how long it might have stayed there without being noticed, if the fire-alarm whistle had not sounded.

At the first blast of the whistle both boys dropped their mosses and ran for the boat, each crying that he knew it was his turn. Helen stopped to pick up the scattered bits.

"There now, look what you 've done," exclaimed Ralph angrily, "gone and tied it so loosely that it 's drifted off!"

"I don't care! You felt of the knot and said it was all right!" retorted Jack.

"What shall we do?" they asked each other next, feeling that no time must be wasted on a quarrel when some building was afire.

"Aurelia! Aurelia!" shouted Ralph.

"Mother!" cried Jack.

Nobody answered, for both were already at the front gate and the wind carried the sound away from them.

"O dear! I know it is a big one!" exclaimed Ralph, dancing up and down with impatience, as he looked at the wide pool and realized that it would come above his boot-tops.

"Yes sir!" agreed Jack. "Hear that whistle, will you?" he added, as the engineer at the waterworks ran up and down the scale in a way that always meant a large fire.

"Come along, fellows!" shouted Ben Stuart, as he ran down the street. "They say it 's the flour-mill."

"I 'm going," declared Ralph, climbing down the end of the pile where it sloped off into the water.

"So 'm I," said Jack, following as fast as he could.

Helen saw them going and was fright-

ened. "Boys! Boys!" she scolded. "You 're being bad if you get wet. Mother said you *must* not. You MUST not! 'Sides, you 'll leave me all alone, and I can't get the boat, and I can't ever get off at all till Father comes. Please don't go away and leave me! I 'll fink you 're meaner 'n anyfing if you do. BOYS!"

But the boys were gone, muttering that they "did n't care," and that they "were always allowed to go to daylight fires anyhow." Helen remained on the woodpile, chattering away as fiercely as a red squirrel until the tears came, and she sank down in a miserable little heap on the woodpile and wiped her eyes on the handkerchief filled with moss. The corners of the handkerchief had been tied together, but tiny scraps stuck out here and there and made brown and green streaks on her face as she mopped away her tears.

Still nobody heard her calling for help. The fire was indeed a large one for Winthrop, and Mrs. Miller and Aurelia had

walked down the street a way to make sure that it was not spreading toward their homes. Helen remembered hearing her father say that there was almost always one good way out of a difficulty, if people were only patient and clever enough to find it.

"O dear!" she sighed. "If that puddle were not quite so wide and quite so deep in the field back of our fence, I would climb down that side and get around to the street that way. If I were a fairy, I'd just wave my wand and dry it right up. . . Mother says that little girls can do lots of things just as well as fairies, though. . . I wonder . . I just b'lieve. . . I'll try it anyhow, 'cause I'm sure Father won't care when I tell him why I had to, and anyhow I can put them back as soon as the puddles dry up!"

Saying this, Helen chose the narrowest shallow place and began dropping wood into the puddle in the field back of their house. It was really part of the same one, you know, on which they had been playing, only the fence and the woodpile divided it.

Every stick made a big splash, but Helen worked hard and fast, aiming the stick at precisely the right place and then dodging back to keep from being spattered.

When twenty sticks had been thrown over, Helen climbed down the fence and pulled a fishpole after her, one which Jack had been about to use when the alarm sounded. Taking the pole to steady herself, she managed to walk on the wood which lay under the water and get out of the puddle without its reaching the top of her boots. When that was done it took only a minute more for her to cross to another fence, climb over that into the street, and run toward the fire, the happiest little girl in Winthrop.

Surely she was the happiest little girl. Surely, also, she was the last child to reach the fire. Ralph and Jack had come up, breathless and dripping wet from the waist down, at least fifteen minutes before she got there. They edged their way as far forward as they were allowed

to go — and came face to face with their father!

"My sons!" he said, putting a hand on the shoulder of each. "How do you happen to be here in this condition?"

Jack's face turned very red. Ralph looked away from his father and changed his weight from one foot to the other.

"I wish an answer," said Mr. Miller.

"Well, you see," said Ralph, "we were all on top of the woodpile when the alarm sounded, and our boat had blown away somehow, and so we had to wade, and we got wet some."

"A good deal, I should say," said Mr. Miller grimly. "Please explain to me why you 'had to wade.' I do not see the need of it myself, and I remember that Mother said you *must* keep dry."

"Why, we wanted to see the fire," explained Jack, trying not to show how uncomfortable he felt. "You know you 've always let us go to fires in the daytime."

"Um-m," said Mr. Miller. "How about

Helen? Was she on the woodpile, too?"

The boys hung their heads and murmured "Yes."

"Where is she now?" he said.

Jack did not reply. Ralph said. "Guess she 's still there."

"Oh! Then she did not 'have to' wade through puddles and come?" asked Mr. Miller.

"She 's a girl," the boys muttered. "That 's a lot different."

"I feel sure," said Mr. Miller very gravely, "that if you boys had thought as much about being obedient as about having a good time, you would have found some way of reaching here without getting wet." He drew pencil and notebook from his pocket, wrote a note on a leaf, and tore it out, handing it to Ralph.

"Go home as fast as you both can run," he said, "and hand that to your mother. If she is not there, give it to Aurelia. If neither is there, read it yourselves and follow the directions."

The boys turned in silence and started homeward. Ralph sniffed and hunted desperately for the handkerchief which he had left on the woodpile. Jack's face was still ablaze, partly from running to the fire, but more from shame. Both boys knew that it would be quite useless to tease their father, or to delay their home-going. It was not the first time that they had been sent home with a note, and they knew that at noon Mr. Miller would ask and be told exactly at what time that note had been delivered. They had no hope of being allowed to return to the fire, and they began to wonder what had become of Helen.

Mrs. Miller was there by the time they reached home, and looked them over sharply before reading the note. It was as follows:

DEAR CHRISTINE:

I have just found these boys at the fire, dripping wet and with boots full of water. They left Helen on the woodpile, without means of escape, and disobeyed you by get-

ting wet—all for the sake of coming. Send them to bed. HERBERT.

Mrs. Miller read it twice. "Leave your boots out here on the porch," she said. "Then go quickly to the bathroom and put your wet things in the tub. As soon as you are well dried and in bed I will bring you some warm drinks."

"But, Mother," said Ralph, too penitent to be angry, "may we see about Helen first? We are wet now, anyway, so we might as well get the boat for her before we go to bed."

Mrs. Miller nodded. "You must be quick about it," she said.

The boys ran around the house. They looked. They called. But no sign of Helen could they find, and very dolefully they went back to the house.

"We can't find her anywhere," they reported.

"O dear!" said Mrs. Miller. "I wonder if she waded through that deep water and went to the fire. She will surely be ill if

she did. Get into bed quickly, and then I will go down to hunt for her."

"Do you *want* to go, Mother?" asked Ralph.

"I wanted to write on my new book," she replied.

Two very meek boys swallowed their hot ginger tea and snuggled down in bed. A minute later they heard the front door close behind their mother.

Jack was the first to cry aloud. Ralph joined him on the second wail. "She did n't scold a bit," Jack said.

"And if she waded through the puddle, she did it because we did," sobbed Ralph.

"And if she 's ill it will be our fault," cried Jack. "And maybe she will die of ammonia or something."

"And I know she is in a hurry to finish her book," said Ralph.

Then they stopped talking and just cried.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Miller reached the scene of the fire and found Helen, her face all streaked with green and brown, standing

near Maggie and Lucinda and chewing on a stick of licorice wood. Her clothing was perfectly dry.

"May I stay?" she asked. "I am all right, and my clothes are all dry, 'cause I made a little path with chunks of wood under the water."

"Stay as long as you wish," said her mother, with a sigh of relief. "You are a good child, and if you want to be late for dinner, you may."

Ralph and Jack were much comforted when they heard the news, and then, their anxiety about her being over, they began to pity themselves.

"The roof is probably going to fall in, in about two minutes," said Ralph.

"We could have seen every bit of it from where we stood," groaned Jack. "I don't see how Helen ever thought of using the wood that way," he added. "And she is only a girl, too!"

"Bet you I know," said Ralph, sitting bolt upright. "You see she just thought

she *had* to stay there until she could get away dry, so she *had* to find out some way. You know when folks *have* to, they can."

When Helen came home, the fire was all over and only smoking ashes remained. She had had a fine time, and was quite ready to pity and forgive her unfortunate brothers, who had been obliged to remain in bed until dinner-time and in the house afterward.

"Tell you what I'll do," she said, after thinking for a minute and peeping into a small yellow paper bag a few times. "I'll give you my choc-lat mice. Rosa Jacobs gave me three, but I ate one. You may have the rest."

"Oh, thank you," cried the boys, and Jack added, "I'm sorry I said you were only a girl. You ar' n't. You are as clever as a boy."

"Cleverer!" said Ralph, as he bit off the head of his chocolate mouse. "I'll never, never call you 'only a girl' again."

"I don't care," said Helen, contentedly.

"I 'd rather be a girl, 'cause then I don't get so dirty!"

"The worst thing about me now," said Ralph, "is that I feel so mean about spoiling Mother's morning."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PLAY.

IF you have ever got your rubber boots full of water, you know how long it takes to get them thoroughly dried out. The Miller boys' boots could not be worn again until Tuesday and by that time the puddles were almost gone. It was no fun to play out-of-doors when they had to keep away from the water, and when all the other boys were discussing the fire that they had missed watching, so they stayed inside as much as possible.

On Saturday afternoon, Lucinda, who had a cold and could not play out, came over to visit them. "Let 's begin our play," she said. "We can get it all planned out this afternoon, and then we can get the scenery ready and fix up our theatre some

other day. Do you suppose your father will let us have it in the barn over on your new place when it 's a little warmer ?"

"I think so," said Ralph. "They will not be working in it for a while."

"Then we 'll put up an 'Opera-House' sign on the outside," said Lucinda, "and make everything very grand. Won't it seem funny ? Now it is only an empty barn. Then it will be an opera-house, and then, next fall, it will be a regular home upstairs, where I live with the Hathaways, and where Billy and the lawn-mower stay downstairs."

"And the automobile, if we ever get one," sighed Ralph, who longed for an auto every day, and read all the motor-car advertisements in his father's magazines.

"Oh, machinery, machinery, machinery!" said Jack, who had not the least mechanical ability and sometimes wished that Ralph had not. "You will turn into a machine some day!"

"O boys," said Lucinda, "do get at the play."

"All right," agreed Jack. "How do you begin? I can write a book all right, you know, but I don't understand how to fix up a play. I have a good name for it, though. Call it *The Robbers.*"

"That is good," said Ralph.

And Lucinda added, "I don't see how you can think of such grand names right off. Did you get it out of your own head?"

"Yes," said Jack carelessly. "You see after a fellow has begun to write books he thinks of lots of things. We must have the robbers just terribly wicked."

"Mother would n't want us to chew tobacco or anything like that, even on the stage," warned Ralph.

"Use gum," said Lucinda, "if you have to chew anything, but I don't believe you will. I saw a villain once on the stage—that other time I went, besides *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, you know. He had great heavy eyebrows and black moustache and carried

a revolver and a long knife in his boots. He talked way down in his stomach and scowled like everything."

"Let me be a villain," said Ralph. "What does it mean, anyhow?"

"Oh, anybody that is dreadfully wicked," replied Lucinda. "You can be one and Jimmie can be another, because he has a false moustache that he bought down-town."

"I'm going to be a poor little boy that finds out about the robbers and scares them away," said Jack.

"I tell you what," suggested Ralph, "you be the boy and let Patsy be the rich man that they were going to rob, and then he can reward you."

"*Uh*-huh," said Jack. "Sort of like Robert in the book I wrote. I always like stories and things where poor children get rich."

"I don't care so much what I am," said Lucinda, "only I want to let down my hair and faint away. I wonder what Helen would like to be? Where is she?"

"She is out wading again," said Ralph. "She won't care much as long as you let her wear bracelets."

"She might be Jack's little sister in the play," suggested Lucinda, "and then, when the rich man rewarded Jack, he could give him some bracelets for his sister."

"All right," agreed the boys, and Ralph added, "What shall we have Maggie be?"

"She has decided that she would rather not act," replied Lucinda. "She would rather be the one to make the announcements. I believe, though, she would just as soon do something separate, like singing or dancing, where she would n't have to dress up or fix her face any."

"We 'll ask her," said the rest, and they made an outline of the play and a list of the scenery needed. Lucinda had brought over her precious old play-bill, and that had given them many ideas. Mrs. Miller passed by the playroom door and paused to visit a minute, so they asked her advice about a few things.

From that time on the days were growing warmer, and the children were allowed to go in and out of the barn on the new place. The doors, big and little, always stood wide open, and the sunshine pouring in lighted up a most remarkable "opera house."

The play was to be given in the main part of the barn, and for a time they were much perplexed about the stage. Ralph had asked his father to have the carpenters build one, but of course Mr. Miller had to refuse. Then Patsy tried laying some long planks across between two saw-horses. This make a very narrow stage and extremely jiggly in the middle, but they got along with it very well until one of the robbers (it was Ralph) stepped backward onto a projecting end to make his most thrilling speech. Then up came the other end of the plank on which he stood and down went the robber, speech, tin knife, and all.

After that they took a lot of packing-cases, which had been stacked up in one of

the empty stalls, and laid them close together. Most of them were of the same size, eighteen inches thick, and these made the front part of the stage. The few that were thicker were put in the background, where they were used as seats or rocks—seats during parlor scenes and rocks when the scene was an out-of-door one. When they were seats, draperies of some sort were thrown over them. The stage was slightly uneven and the actors and actresses had to learn to lift their feet quite high while on it.

Mrs. Miller forbade the use of footlights, but consented to have many lanterns hung on each side of the stage. "It won't matter if there are none above the audience," she said. "For my part, I prefer the main part of a theatre dark. It makes the stage look better."

At last a night was chosen and the children set out to sell tickets in the neighborhood. The tickets were printed by the girls and sold by all the troupe—price five

cents for grown people and three cents for children. Twenty-five had been prepared. These were sold in less than an hour and another twenty-five made in great haste. The play was to be given on a Friday evening, two weeks after the flood.

"It is too bad that barn is so small," complained Jack, as he was starting out with his second package of tickets. "I know there 'd be a lot of children from other parts of town if we asked them to buy tickets."

"You might give a matinee on Saturday for children only," suggested Mrs. Miller.

"A matin-what?" asked Jack. "And what does it mean anyhow?"

"A matinee," said Mrs. Miller. (It is pronounced matinay, you know.) "That means a daylight acting of play or opera."

"Perhaps we will," said Jack. We want to make all the money we can."

"For what?" asked his mother, but Jack had gone before she asked.

When evening came, Mr. Miller put on a

white tie and stuck a flower into his buttonhole, and stood in the doorway of the barn, ready to help the boys if they wished him to do so. Mrs. Miller looked very sweet in her pretty little bonnet and white shawl. She carried her best fan, too, which greatly delighted her children.

The seats for the audience were planks laid across soap-boxes or saw-horses, and surely there was never a merrier audience anywhere. Sallie, Janice, Bertha, and Rosa sat in the very front row, and Donald and Dorothy Black were just behind them. A few other children from the neighborhood were there, and nearly all their parents. Mrs. Flannigan brought the baby, because she had nobody with whom to leave her, and that delightful infant slept all evening in a manger full of hay close by Mrs. Flannigan's seat.

There were several surprises. The first was when Professor Harding, who had not been asked to buy a ticket, came to the door and gravely presented his nickel for

admission. The next was when Mr. Field, the banker, asked for a box seat.

"They are 'most all boxes, Mr. Field," said Ralph, who had never heard a part of a theatre called a box. "They are boxes or planks placed on boxes. We had a few stools, but they are all down in front where the three-cent children sit."

Mr. Field, who was stout and jolly, chuckled at the mention of the three-cent children, and said, "Never mind about my box seat. I think I will take a plank seat beside some of these five-cent friends of mine."

Behind the curtain, an old buggy cover, there was much excitement and hurrying around, and about once every minute some one of the actors would pull the curtain aside an inch or two and peep out. At the door Ralph excitedly counted the tickets that he had taken.

"They are all in," he whispered. "Now, Father, get your fiddle."

Lately Mr. Miller had taken up his old

violin and practised a little, and now he lifted it from the case and began playing simple Irish melodies that set many feet to marking time on the barn floor. Ralph disappeared behind the curtain.

Five minutes later somebody pulled the curtain aside a bit and whispered loudly, "We are all ready now," at which Mr. Miller smilingly gave a final flourish with his bow and sat down near the stage. A bell sounded behind the curtain, it parted in the middle, and slid somewhat jerkily to the sides.

In the centre of the stage sat a man (Patsy) who was evidently very rich. He was counting his money at a table. The audience could not see all of the money, because there were other things on the table, but they could hear him count and heard the clink of coin. He was evidently at home, for he wore an elegant bath-robe dressing-gown and slippers. A huge ring glistened on one of his hands.

Seated on the couch was a young lady in

a trained gown (the gown looked like an old one of Mrs. Miller's). She was reading a book and turning the leaves rather faster than people generally turn them. Her hair was done quite high upon her head and she felt of it often. When the man, who appeared to be her father, finished counting his money, she began telling him of the grand ball which she had attended the night before, and asked him to buy her a new diamond necklace.

"My old one is almost worn out," she said. "If there are any pretty diamond bracelets in the store," she added, "please bring me a couple of them."

Her father agreed and they talked of many different things. Once she walked to the window (a big sheet of paper marked off for the sash and pinned against the wall, with curtains draped back from it), and looked out.

"Ah," she said, "how terribly dark and wild the night is!"

Toward the end of the scene she said,

"How much money was there to-night, Father?"

"A little over twenty millions," he replied.

"Ah," said the young lady, carefully arranging her train and clasping her hands, as the curtains closed before her. "How rich we are!"

As soon as the applause died down, Mr. Miller took his violin again and played during the change of scene, while everybody chatted and laughed. Mr. Field said he feared the rich old gentleman would have trouble yet. "That is too much money to keep in the house," he said. "He ought to bring it down to my bank for safe-keeping."

The curtain parted again. The lanterns which lighted the stage had been turned low, and several armfuls of hay, piled on what had recently been the couch, showed that this scene was laid in a barn. The only actor on the stage was Billy, the burro, who was tied to one side and contentedly nibbled a late supper.

Soon entered Jack and Helen, as the very

poor boy and his little sister. They talked about how hungry they were, and the boy told his sister that she should go to sleep at once and be ready to go out with him in the morning, when he blacked shoes and sold papers. She said she was glad that they were allowed to sleep in such a nice barn, because it was better than sleeping out of doors. Then she fell asleep and her brother began tidying up his boot-blacking box. A slight sound showed that some one was about to enter the barn, and the boy hid in the hay. Then entered two most desperate looking robbers (Ralph and Jimmie), who sat on the floor and planned to rob the home of the very rich man and his daughter the next night.

As they talked, the poor boy could be seen by the audience to raise his head and listen. At length the robbers left, the taller one remarking in a very deep voice, "To-morrow night, and we shall be wealthy beyond compare!"

When they were gone, the poor boy stole

down from his bed on the hay and said, "They shall be foiled!"

The curtains closed.

The next act showed the rich man at home alone. The boy entered, clothed very shabbily. "Aha, my little man," said the rich man. "What can I do for you to-day?"

The boy told what he had overheard. The man was very grateful and gave him money, promising to do more for him if he would assist in driving away the robbers when they came. He also sent a pair of bracelets to the boy's little sister. The boy left and the rich man's daughter entered, holding her head very stiffly, and with her hair looking as though it needed a few more pins to hold it securely. The man told her that robbers were coming that night. The young lady raised both hands to her head, screamed "Robbers!" and fainted, while her heavy coil of hair unrolled and fell over her shoulders. The man paid no attention to her, but raised his hands above his head and cried, "Now all my

hope is in that brave boy, my deliverer!"

Thus ended the third act.

Before the fourth act Maggie, who had declined to take part in the play, came down and asked Mrs. Miller to go behind the curtain and help for a few minutes. She also had a message to the younger members of the audience. "The boys say that you must n't be scared," she said, "when they shoot in this act, because they won't use any bullets. It will all be quite safe, only it sounds scary."

Her message delivered, Maggie took her place before the curtain and sang a little Irish lullaby, with Mr. Miller playing the accompaniment. It was something which he had overheard her singing the night before, and had insisted she should give it at the entertainment. They had kept it as a secret until the last minute, and Maggie had another Irish song ready when the loud applause called her back.

The fourth act showed the rich man's house again. The boy, entering with two large

toy pistols, hid himself behind a curtain after saying that it was already midnight. The light was very dim. He was hardly hidden when the two robbers entered on tiptoe. They wore black masks over their faces and carried dark-lanterns made of tomato cans. At every second step they said "Hist!" or "Sh!" in a loud whisper.

The little girls, down in the front seats, huddled closer together and got hold of each other's hands.

The robbers hunted high and low for the money, but never touched the curtain behind which the boy stood hidden. At last one found the cupboard where the money was. "Aha!" he cried. "I have found it!"

The other robber joined him, and together they were lifting the bags of coin, when the boy, stepping from behind the curtain, fired the two pistols at once, and the robbers fell dead. The boy advanced to the front of the stage. "Foiled!" said he. "Foiled!"

The next and last scene required a good deal of preparation. Mr. Miller declared

that he had played all the tunes he knew at least twice, so Mr. Jacobs took the violin and bent his blond head over it, while he played some of the airs he had loved in Europe, when he was a boy. "Ve end mit a big sing, eh?" said he, "someding ve all know?"

"It is a good idea," said Mr. Miller. "I will tell the troupe."

The last act showed the same scene as before, except that the dead robbers were gone and the lights turned up. The rich man and his daughter had taken the boy and his sister into their home to live, and both were dressed in their Sunday best, the little girl wearing her bracelets at last. The rich man made a speech, and presented the boy with a gold watch and chain and the little girl with a burro, leading Billy onto the stage as he spoke. Billy the obedient, who always did as he was told, and behaved beautifully.

"And now," said the rich man, "Let us end our evening with a song."

The actors all joined hands, Billy standing in the middle, between the rich man and the

boy, and the young lady and the little boy on either side. The robbers, apparently quite recovered from their recent deaths, came to stand at the ends of the lines, and Mr. Jacobs struck up *America*.

"Everybody stand!" shouted Mr. Miller, and he led off in singing. The Flannigan baby awakened and was taken up, but cried for only a minute. Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs in their more broken German, and Mrs. Flynn in her strong Irish brogue, joined as heartily as any in the national song.

When it ended and everybody was talking at once, it seemed to strike Billy that he had not done his part, so he braced his feet on the little stage where he still stood and brayed and brayed. And how everybody laughed!

"He was saying he hat a goot time too," said Mr. Jacobs. "Eh, Rosa, how you like to gif a little play on stage yourself, somedimes? De children did vell, very vell. I haf enchoyed myself greatly."

Behind the curtain Aurelia was helping

the tired little actors. "You did first rate," she said. "I never enjoyed a play so much in my life, not even in a real theatre."

"Honest, Aurelia?" asked the children.

"Honest," she said. "But perhaps it was partly because I never saw one before where most of the troupe sort of belonged to me."

"Ah-h-h!" yawned the little boy who had supported his little sister and killed two robbers. "Don't anybody wake me up in the morning, please. I'd rather sleep than to eat breakfast, even if we should have pancakes." Then he added anxiously, "But you won't have them this time, will you, Aurelia?"

"No," said she. "I'll put 'em off till next week. Now all you youngsters scatter off home as tight as you can, and go to bed."

CHAPTER XV.

THE WANDERERS.

MRS. MILLER was just settling herself for a morning's work on the last chapters of the new book, when Ralph knocked on the library door. She sighed but called out "Come!"

"You hadn't begun yet, had you?" he said. "At first I thought I wouldn't knock, but the more I thought about it the more I was sure you wouldn't mind. I want to go so very badly that I think it is important."

"Do your errand quickly, please," said his mother.

"Well, it is this way," explained Ralph. "I want to just wander off somewhere and keep on going until I am tired of it. I've felt that way quite a while, and now it's

spring vacation, and I wondered if you wouldn't be willing that we should.

"We?" asked his mother.

"Yes, Jack wants to go almost as badly as I do. He wouldn't come in because he thought you were writing, but he is listening at the door now."

"Come in, Jack," cried his mother, and Jack entered, smiling.

"Now you boys probably know exactly how you would like to spend the day, if I were willing," said Mrs. Miller. "Tell me all about it and then I will give my answer."

Ralph looked at Jack and Jack at Ralph, as though wondering whether it would do. Ralph cleared his throat a couple of times.

"I don't believe you'll let us," he said, "but what we'd rather do is this, and Mrs. Flannigan will let her boys if you will let us."

"Are they listening at the door, too?" asked Mrs. Miller.

Ralph grinned and began to feel more hopeful. "We would rather carry our

dinner," he said, "and sort of fool along as slowly as we want to until we reach Keysville—you know it is only four miles. Probably we would eat our dinner on the way somewhere. Then we'd walk around Keysville, and maybe visit some of the stores and factories, and then—then—if you are willing that we should spend our money for it, we would like to come home on the four o'clock train. Of course we wouldn't do anything tough, or mix up with any rowdies."

"Of *course* not," said Mrs. Miller. "I think I will let you go, only—hold on—wait a minute—don't smother me with kisses—I want you to promise that you will telephone back your safe arrival by two o'clock. And I hope you will bring some trifle to Helen, so that she will not feel neglected. Even a bunch of pussy willows would please her."

When the kissing and shouting were over, the Flannigans were told, and Aurelia put up a luncheon in a shoe-box. At half-past eight they were off.

"O fellows," said Jimmie, the quiet one, "aint it just slick!"

"'*Is n't*,' not '*ain't*,'" corrected Patsy.

"Going by the road or on the track?" asked Jack.

"I'd rather go by the track," said Ralph. "Then we can see all the trains pass, you know."

"Got some pins we can lay on the rails?" asked Jimmie.

"'Have you' not 'got'", corrected Patsy.

"All right. Anyway so the pins are there," said the good-natured Jimmie.

"Not a pin," said the boys after a search, and Ralph added, "Here are some pieces of copper wire in my pocket. They'll do just as well."

"Come on, fellows," said Patsy. "Let's see how far we can walk down the track, before the nine o'clock comes along."

"I can beat any of you walking on the rails," announced Ralph. "I walked a whole mile that way once without losing my balance. Gracious, but my ankles ached afterward!"

"Better not try it again, sonny," advised Patsy. "We wouldn't care to carry you the other three miles to Keysville, and we would n't like to have one of our crowd hobbling along with a couple of sticks for canes."

"St! There 's a chipmunk," said Jimmie. "Look at him go!"

"There's a red squirrel after him," cried Jack. "No wonder he 's going. Squirrel can't catch him, though. Wonder why they always fight so?"

"Ho! What would Professor Harding think if he heard you say that?" remarked Patsy. "Guess he'd put you out of the Saturday Club."

"Don't tell on me," begged Jack. "I know it's because the squirrels are lazy and try to live part of the winter by robbing the chipmunks. I just did n't think when I spoke. That is all."

"There 's another chipmunk over in the field," cried Ralph. "See him on that stump? Now he 's going! Look at him

limp. Got hurt some way. I believe I can catch him."

Like a flash Ralph dropped his lunch-box, climbed the fence, and went after the little creature. The other boys dropped their boxes and followed. The chipmunk was very lame, but managed to scramble along in some way in the same direction the boys had been taking. They kept gaining a little and at last surrounded him. Jimmie was the lucky boy who managed to catch him. He dropped his new straw hat over him and slid a broad shingle under that, one which they picked up in a fence-corner.

"There he is! I got him!" exclaimed Jimmie. "Now, Mr. Chipmunk, we'll carry you right along with us."

"Can't," said Jack gloomily. "Couldn't even if we had a cage. Don't you remember how we talked about such things in Saturday Club once, and decided that it was n't fair to keep wild creatures for pets?"

"That 's so," agreed the boys, "and we promised always to be fair to them."

"Hold on, though," said Ralph. "There is something else to think about. Don't you know how it told, in one of Professor Harding's books, about an injured wild creature not having much chance to get well, because some animal or other was sure to come along and eat him, when he was weak and could not get away? That's just what will happen to this chipmunk if we leave him. Like as not before this time to-morrow he won't be anything but a lump in some big snake's belly. I think he'd rather be alive in a cage."

"That's so," said Patsy admiringly. "Tell you what, Jimmie, we might take him home anyhow, and then we could ask Professor Harding or Mrs. Miller, and see what they think about it. If they say it is n't the square thing to keep him, we can let him go again."

"That suits me," agreed Jimmie. "Wish you fellows would hustle around and get something to put him in. He's wiggling around in there like everything, and I'm

afraid he'll begin to gnaw my hat pretty soon."

"Wonder what we can get?" said Patsy.

"Dunno," said Jack. "I've been told the right thing is always around, if you're clever enough to find it."

The boys scattered in different directions to hunt for something, they did not know what. Jack suddenly disappeared from sight in a hollow of the field. When he arose he had an empty tomato can in his hand. "I found it!" he shouted. "Just the thing! Just cosey! Pop him in there, and bend the top down again and stick it in your pocket. When you want to feed him, drop your food through the crack. That's his little window, you see."

"Popping him in" did not prove to be so very easy after all, and Jimmie got his hand slightly bitten while doing it, but at last the chipmunk was safely stowed away, the hat was again on Jimmie's head, and the big shingle was sent sailing high into the air. Just as it fell, they heard the first morning

passenger train start from the Winthrop station. They had been too much interested in other things to notice it before.

"Hurry up and get the wires on the track," cried Jack.

"There won't be time," said the older boys. "It wouldn't be safe. Keep them for the next train."

"Let's get over the fence, anyhow," cried Jimmie, and over they scrambled, Jimmie with the chipmunk, and the others empty-handed. In an instant the train came thundering along, the boys shouted and waved their hats, a friendly brakeman flourished his in return, and the colored porter grinned at them from a window of the parlor-car. The boys snatched off their hats and raced after the receding train. When they stopped running, they were far down the track.

"Running gave me an appetite," said Ralph. Then he looked dismayed. "Where is our lunch!" he gasped.

"Way back where we dropped it when

we saw the chipmunk," said Patsy. "Now think of us doing that!"

They rested a few minutes on the grassy bank beside the track and fanned themselves with their hats. "Two can get the lunch as well as four," said Patsy. "Let's draw cuts to see which go and which stay."

"No," said Ralph. "Decide it the way Mother makes us decide things at home when we dispute about turns. She makes each of us stand on one foot in the middle of the room and far enough apart so that we can't touch each other. We start together, and the first fellow to touch either his hand or his other foot to the floor has to give up."

Patsy and Jimmie looked much interested. "Why does she do that?" they asked.

"Oh, it's a dandy way," said Jack. "It makes you laugh so. When I was a little boy and we drew lots I used to be cross sometimes if I got the wrong one; but when we have to stand on one foot we wobble around so that we get to laughing,

and then we 're not cross a bit, are we, Ralph ?"

"No, never," said Ralph. "Sometimes we keep on trying to see which can hold his balance the longer, just for the fun of it, until we forget what we had been most ready to quarrel about before, or, if we remember it, we don't care to do it any more, anyhow."

"Let 's try it now," said Patsy. "The first two fellows who lose their balance have to go back for the lunch and the others wait here with the chipmunk."

Each boy chose a railroad tie on which to stand, and two stood on either side of the track. Jack began giggling at once to see how solemnly Patsy and Jimmie went about it. Ralph laughed outright at Patsy's face and then swayed, tried to regain his balance, waved his hands wildly, and plunged forward.

"Guess I am one to go," he said. "I 'll sit down and wait for the other fel—Hello, Jack! We 're the ones, are we ? "

Jack had laughed too hard and gone over before his brother was fairly seated. So the Flannigans and the chipmunk waited on the bank while the lunch-boxes were brought. One of the boxes was opened and some pieces of cooky broken off for the little prisoner, but he gazed upward fearfully with his beady eyes, and refused to eat.

"I am pretty hungry myself," said Jimmie.

"Now, you are not going to eat one mouthful before eleven o'clock, James Joseph Flannigan," said Patsy, sternly. "It's yourself that will be starving to death before the afternoon train if you do."

"Aw, just one cooky," begged Jimmie.

"Not a one," answered Patsy, firmly, "and by rights you should wait for the noon whistle. What do you suppose would become of the men on father's gang if they ate whenever they felt like it?"

Mr. Flannigan was the foreman of the Winthrop section gang, and very much liked and respected by all the other railroad men. All the year through he and

his gang were looking after the railroad track and roadbed, keeping them safe and neat. The boys admired him greatly, and when Patsy spoke of him in this way it ended all teasing.

"The gang will be along pretty soon," said Jimmie. "Father said they were going up toward Keysville, as soon as they had fixed one place the other side of the station; should n't wonder if I saw them now," and he pointed to a black speck coming down the track.

"It surely is!" cried Ralph, as he made out the shape of the hand-car.

"Yes, sirree!" said Jack. "Oh, but it must be fun riding on a hand-car. It looks so easy!"

"It's not so easy as it looks," remarked Patsy, who had tried it. "'T is just a trick of walking with your arms, instead of your legs, while you are standing still."

The boys were hardly through laughing at Patsy's description of working the hand-car when it came alongside of them. Mr.

Flannigan slowed down when he saw who the boys were. "Jump on, youngsters," he said, "and we'll give yez a lift."

The boys huddled closely together on the back end of the car, wishing that their lunches had been put into pails instead of boxes, so that they might feel more like real section men themselves. They started slowly, and then went faster and faster, until Ralph thought they must be going at regular express train speed.

"I wish this could last forever," he said, looking over his shoulder at the working of the pumps.

Mr. Flannigan heard it and laughed. "Not wid me at the pumps," he said. "Whin are yez goin' home?"

"On the four o'clock train," replied Ralph.

"If yez thought yer mother would be willin," Mr. Flannigan said, "yez cud go home on the car wid us, but we shall not rache Winthrop till six. We shall wurruk along here until dinner time, an' thin go on beyant Keysville for a while."

"Could n't we telephone and find out?" asked Jack.

"Do that," said Mr. Flannigan "an' if she says yez may, jist be down at the railroad as soon as the foor o'clock thrain goes by, an' we 'll pick yez oop, wherever yez are, whin we coom along."

"I fear she will think it is too much bother for you," said Jack.

"Not a bit av it," said Mr. Flannigan. "An' if it was, sure I 'd be glad to do it. She 's been mighty good to Patsy and Jimmie."

"You bet!" said Jimmie.

So it was settled, and when the boys ate their dinner at noon, it was on a sunshiny bank with the section gang. Some leaned against the fence and some sprawled upon the bank, while across the track the red-winged blackbirds fluttered around among the rushes and pussy-willows of a swamp, and a meadow-lark sang from a maple. The men were rough in their ways, but kind, and the boys were perfectly happy.

They heard stories of simple out-of-door life, and of some life that was not so simple. Mr. Flannigan told them how for three days and two nights of the recent heavy rains he and his men had neither gone to bed nor sat down to a table.

"We wurruked in the wet as long as we cud," he said, "bankin' up the worst washed-out places on the thrack an' diggin' ditches in new places to carry off the wather, an' thin, whin wan av us cud n't kape awake any longer, he would jist drop down in the nearest shanty an' slape a bit. They sint our food to us an' we ate as we worruked."

"I should n't think you 'd want to work like that," said Ralph.

"Want to ?" said Mr. Flannigan. "Want to ?"

"'T is not the wantin' to worruk that carries a man through. 'T is the wantin' to do his duty. If wan single shovelful av the earth I dug those nights had been missin', a hull thrain might have been

wricked. Jist yez mind that, me byes. Ivery time annybody laves a part av his duty undone, 't is bound to make throuble for somebody, an' yez niver can till how big the throuble may be or how manny may share it."

"Never?" asked Jack.

"Niver," said Mr. Flannigan, as he put the cover on his empty dinner-pail. "If there is wan thing I know better than anny other, 't is that. Ivery railroad man knows that."

The boys were very thoughtful. Ralph said afterward that he never saw a red-winged blackbird without being reminded of Mr. Flannigan and duty. But in a few minutes they were off for Keysville, on foot this time, and how thoroughly they saw the town!

They drank from the public fountain, they stood in the door of the blacksmith shop, they looked into every store window in town, and hung over the sill of the open printing shop windows to watch the

presses at work. But before they did any of these things they had telephoned to Mrs. Miller. The Keysville operator had been amused to hear their end of the conversation as they crowded around the telephone, all four boys taking part and Ralph beginning it. This was it:

"Hello, is this mother? This is Ralph. We are here. Had a lovely time and ate it by the track. Caught a chipmunk and rode on the hand-car. Mr. Flannigan wants us to ride home with him on the hand-car, but he won't get home till six. May we? Oh, thank you. We are being good boys and having a fine time . . . So 'm I . . . So 'm I . . . So 'm I. Did you hear those? They were the other fellows. Good-bye! Oh, I forgot to tell you. One of its legs was hurt and that is why. Good-bye."

They now had their railroad fare to spend, and that took much thought. "I'd like something for myself," said Jack, after he had bought Helen a five-cent handker-

chief, "some little thing, just for a sovereign of the trip."

"Souvenir," corrected Ralph.

"All right, souvenir then," said Jack and purchased a five-cent Jews-harp.

Ralph bought fancy red, white, and blue pencils for Helen and himself. Then the boys put all their remaining money together, bought crackers and cheese for their afternoon lunch, and carried it down to the station.

They saw the afternoon train pull in, take on passengers, and pull out again. When it was gone they started down the track towards Winthrop. Here Mr. Flannigan found them on the first high bank, sitting in a row and trying to see who could throw pebbles the straightest at a certain weather-beaten pine stump.

The ride home was very delightful, especially when, just as they reached the down grade leading to the Winthrop station, Mr. Flannigan let the boys help him work the pumps, while the men sat on

the edges of the car and dangled their feet over. How important the boys felt then!

"I tell you, Mother," said Jack, in describing it all to Mrs. Miller afterward, "I just felt as big as anything there for a while. It 's been a lovely day and *very* exciting!"

CHAPTER XVI.

PETS.

AS soon as Patsy and Jimmie could get their morning tasks done, the day after their trip to Keysville, they took the chipmunk in their old bird-cage and started for the Miller house.

"Going to knock at the back door?" asked Jimmie.

"Guess we'd better not," answered Patsy, who knew the ways of the family very well. "Ralph says his mother is hurrying to get her book done and does n't like to be interrupted. We 'll just sit down on the back steps and whistle. The boys will come if they are there, and if they 're not, Aurelia will tell us pretty soon. I wish Mrs. Miller could see our chipmunk, but I don't want to bother her."

"We might kind of walk up and down with him in front of the library window," suggested Jimmie, "and then maybe she'd see us and come out."

"Uh-*uh*," said Patsy, "that isn't business."

A few minutes later two boys and a chipmunk were on the Miller back porch, and the neighborhood whistle-summons was heard on the clear air. Aurelia came to the door, her hands full of wet dish-towels to be hung on the line.

"For the land's sake!" said she. "What kind of a wild beast have you got now? Looks a little mite like a baby tiger, only his stripes has got skewed around."

"Why, this is a chipmunk, Aurelia," began Jimmie, carefully. Then he saw her eyes twinkle, and knew that he did not need to explain.

"Why, so it is!" exclaimed Aurelia. "How did you catch him?" She bent down to examine him more closely. "Poor little critter!" she said, as she saw the injured hind leg. "Lame, ain't he? I hope

you boys have n't been settin' traps for squirrels an' such like?"

"*Not much!*" said the Flannigans together.

"Probably some other fellow has been," added Patsy, "and this chipmunk got hurt in one of 'em. We 're going to take care of him till he gets well, and then let him go, if he wants to. Has Mrs. Miller begun writing yet? We wish she could tell us what to do with him."

"Writing? No," replied Aurelia. "Dr. Black came in to see her about something or other, an' she 's in the parlor with him. The boys have gone on an errand for me, but they 'll be back soon. I guess Helen is over to Bertha's."

Jimmie whispered to Patsy, who nodded. "Say, Aurelia," said Jimmie, "do you think they 'd mind if we sat on the front steps, so that Mrs. Miller could see our chipmunk when she lets Dr. Black out?"

"Mind? Not a speck," answered Aurelia heartily. "Jest you set there quiet while you 're waitin', that 's all."

That was how it happened that when Dr. Black stepped out on the front porch he found two boys and a bird-cage barring his way. "What is this?" he said.

Mrs. Miller followed him out of the door.

"It's our chipmunk. He's lame, so we could catch him, and we're going to keep him until he gets well," exclaimed Patsy.

Dr. Black bent down to look more closely. "His leg is badly hurt," he said. "You might better bring him up to my office and let me care for it."

Jimmie exclaimed, "Oh, thank you!"

Patsy murmured something about not being able to afford it.

"I shall not charge anything," said the doctor. "Are you not the boy who drove that herd of cattle out of my garden last month and kept them from smashing my hot-bed? I thought so. Well, you bring the chipmunk up at eleven and I will take care of his leg."

Then it was Patsy's turn to say "Thank

you," and look pleased. Jimmie whispered to him.

"Please, sir," said Patsy, "Jimmie wants to know if his leg will ever be all right again."

"No," replied the doctor. "He will always be lame, but he will be comfortable."

Dr. Black went away and Mrs. Miller took up the cage. "You will have to care for him right along," said she. "He would soon be killed if taken back to the woods."

"Honest?" asked Jimmie joyfully.

"Of course," said Patsy, fiercely. "Mrs. Miller never says any things that ain't—are not—true."

"He 's mine," said Jimmie, "and I 'd like to name him for you ma'am. Would you mind if I called him Christine?"

Mrs. Miller smiled. "That is a great compliment," she replied, "but I think I would prefer to have him called something else. What shall it be?"

"If we had caught him up north," said Ralph, who had just come up, "we could

get one of the Indians to name him something which means 'He has only three legs.'"

"Call him 'Tripod,'" suggested Mrs. Miller. "A tripod has only three legs."

"That 's what we 'll do!" exclaimed the Flannigans in one breath. "Here, Tripey, Tripey, Tripey!"

At eleven the two Flannigans, Ralph, Jack, Helen, Robert Black, and Bertha Clarke solemnly climbed the stairs to Dr. Black's office, Jimmie carrying Tripod in his cage. The doctor had not yet returned from his morning round of calls. It was the first time that any of the children, except Robert, had been up there, and they felt somewhat uncomfortable. In the first place, there was no window to the waiting-room. All the light came from a sky-light above them, and that seemed strange. Over in one corner of the room stood a queer-looking machine, which, Robert said, made electricity and gave it to ill people. Several charts on the walls showed how the heart,

lungs, and other organs are packed away inside the body. In a glass case, in another corner, were Dr. Black's shining surgical instruments, at which the children gazed with wondering eyes. They sat on the edges of chairs and couch, and talked in whispers, until Dr. Black came hurrying up the stairs and into the office.

"Come into the other room," he said, throwing open a door, and as the seven children tramped after him they looked out the open window and began to chatter.

"Do you doctor chipmunks very much?" asked Helen, gravely.

"This is my first chipmunk patient," replied the doctor. "Perhaps, if I help him, I may have calls from some of his friends."

"Will you have to hurt him very much?" asked Jimmie.

"Not at all," answered the doctor. "I shall give him a little chloroform."

"And what's that?" said Jimmie.

"Sure, it's the stuff they used to put Maggie Flynn to sleep with, when they

fixed her broken leg," explained Patsy. "If you breathe it for a little while first, they can cut off your head or anything, and not a bit do you know about it till you wake up afterward."

The doctor chuckled and carried the cage into the next room. In a few minutes he returned with the chipmunk lying quite still in his hand. Just what he did afterward nobody quite understood, but when he finished the little creature had a stiffly bandaged hind leg all encased in splints. Helen had held the limp little body in the right position while the doctor worked over it. The five boys had stood around, with their necks craned forward, carefully keeping back the scores of questions which they longed to ask, and saying only: "Look at that now!" "He doesn't wiggle a bit!" and, "Bet you the doctor's fixed more'n five thousand broken legs!"

Not until the last bandage was fastened did anybody miss Bertha. Then she was discovered in the waiting-room, her hands

clutching the sides of the chair in which she sat, and her eyes so tightly closed that her face was all puckered and wrinkled by the effort. She would not open them until Dr. Black himself assured her that his work was done.

"I fink you were very foolish," remarked Helen. "The chipmunk did n't get hurted any because he breathed kelloriform. And it was nice to see how Dr. Black fixed him. I fink kelloriform is a good fing. Bad children might take it when they have to be spanked."

"I fear the spanking would not do them so much good then," said Dr. Black, chuckling again.

"I should fink it would," said Helen. "It did the chipmunk just as much good to have you fix his leg, even if you did n't hurt him."

"You might see what your mother thinks about it," suggested Dr. Black.

"She is n't the spanking kind," said Ralph. "I use to wish she was. When I 'd

get into a scrape with the other fellows, they 'd get spanked up and be out having a dandy time, while I 'd have to stay shut up in my room."

Dr. Black laughed outright. "I think that Mrs. Miller knows her business," said he. "Now take good care of the chipmunk, and let me know if the leg comes undone. I think he will let it alone because it is sore. Good-bye! You are welcome to my help. Good-bye!"

"I fink your father is just lovely," said Helen to Robert. "And I fink I will be a lady doctoress when I grow up."

"There 's the noon whistle!" cried Ralph. "We must hurry home to dinner. Let 's have another look at Tripod. Beginning to kick a little, isn 't he? Guess Maggie and Lucinda will think they missed a lot by being gone into the country. Good-bye!"

After dinner Helen went over to Bertha's again, and Ralph and Jack pottered around in the playhouse. The Flannigans were

over with their pet, and after a while it was less interesting than it had been to watch him.

"I'm going to have a pet, too," Jack announced suddenly. "Mother promised me last week that, if I wouldn't make any fuss about not keeping the young adders Ben Stuart gave me, I could have a garter snake for a pet. I'm going for one right now."

"Me too," said Ralph, springing off the ground. "I'll tell her, and then we'll go down to the swamp."

The four boys spent an hour in the swamp, and found no snakes. They visited another swamp with no better luck. Then they went to one which was fully a mile and a half from their home. There Jack found a snake and caught it with a forked stick.

"How are you going to carry him?" asked Jimmie, hopping around on one foot.

"In my hands, of course," replied Jack,

who was tired and warm and somewhat cross. "Did you think I was going to stick him in my pocket or sling him over my shoulder?"

"Say, Jack, leave him there for a few minutes," begged Ralph. "I'd like to get one, too, and I'm sure there must be more of them around here."

"I'd rather go right home," said Jack, "but if you'll hurry I'll wait here by my snake while you hunt, only don't take time to fool around."

Jack squatted down beside his snake and examined the forked stick to make sure that it was not pressing him down too hard. The other boys spread over the swamp and beat the tufts of grass in their search.

"Whoopee!" cried Patsy at last. "Here's a big fellow! Ralph! Hurry up!"

"Where? Where?" cried Ralph, rushing over the uneven ground as fast as he could, falling headlong once and picking himself up again. In his fall his stick was broken,

and he had to catch the snake with his fingers, something which he did quite easily, for he was very quick and agile. As soon as he had the snake held firmly by the neck, so that he could not bite, Ralph was ready to go. Jack picked up his snake in the same way and the little procession started homeward.

"I should think you 'd want to get a snake while we 're out here," said Ralph to the Flannigans.

"Can't keep one," said Patsy shortly.

"Why not? Won't your folks let you?" asked Jack. "Mother lets us once in a while, if we take very good care of them and let them go free in a few days."

"My folks are different. They don't like snakes and such things," said Patsy. "You know Irish people are not used to them, and they are a good deal more Irish than Jimmie and me—I mean Jimmie and I."

"Don't you wish you could keep one?" asked Ralph pityingly.

"Naw! I don't care *now*," said Patsy.

"You know we have the chipmunk. I think Tripod would n't like a snake."

"The snake would like Tripod all right, would n't he?" laughed Ralph. "It would be like the tiger and the young lady." And he began singing over and over again as he marched:

"'There was a young lady of Niger
Who went out to ride on a tiger.
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside
And a smile on the face of the tiger.'"

"*Ralph!*" cried Jack. "I wish you would quit singing that silly thing. I 'm sick of it!"

Ralph, who was altogether too fond of teasing, began the verse again, dancing backward in front of Jack as he sang.

"Please don't," said Jack. "Please stop. I 'm tired and it makes me nervous!"

"There was a young lady—" began Ralph again, but hit his heel on a stone in the road and went sprawling over backward in the dust. As he fell he loosened his grip on the snake, which landed on its back,

righted itself, and began to glide away to the ditch. Ralph scrambled to his feet, overtook the snake, and picked it up, but in his haste and confusion got bitten on his left hand. The other boys gathered around him.

"Are you scared any?" asked Jimmie as he watched the blood ooze from the places where the snake's teeth had gone in.

"Not a bit," said Ralph, who looked rather white. "It hurts, but I'm not scared. Mother says that garter snakes are not at all dangerous."

"Just the same, I'd want her to fix it for me as soon as possible," said Jack. "I'm sorry, Ralph. You may sing that song some more if it'll make you feel any better. I can stand it."

"No, thank you," said Ralph. "I won't. Guess it served me right for teasing you anyhow." And so the accident stopped what might soon have been a quarrel.

"Guess Mother'll be s'prised," said Jack, as they neared home. "She was expecting

only one snake, but she 'll be glad of two, because they 'll be company for each other. Let 's carry them in and show her before we put them in their box. Then she can be getting things ready for Ralph's finger while we fix their little home."

The Flannigans stopped in the playhouse to look at the chipmunk, and the Miller boys rushed headlong in at the side door of their home, each trying to pass the other.

"Mother," they cried, "mother ! see what a surprise we have for you ! They 're dandies, and they 'll enjoy being together because ——— ."

With these words they shot through the wide doorway into the sitting room—and found themselves in the midst of Mrs. Miller's literary club, with Mrs. Miller hurrying from one of the further corners of the room to stop them.

"Oh, my gracious !" said Ralph turning on his heel and getting out much faster than he got in. Jack bolted without a word, dropped his snake into a box as he passed

through the side porch, and did not stop until he landed, panting, in the playhouse. Ralph had been captured by Aurelia, who attended to the bitten finger at once.

The Flannigans were somewhat puzzled by the way in which Jack reappeared, and the peculiar redness of his face.

"Was your mother there?" asked Jimmie.

"Yes," said Jack.

"Was the surprise a success?" asked Patsy.

"Yes," said Jack grimly. "It was the biggest surprise I ever saw."

"Did she like 'em?" persisted Jimmy.

"She didn't really say," replied Jack, truthfully, "but she sort of smiled. Now you fellows have a good time without me. I think I will go in and clean up. I'm not coming out again.

When the ladies left, the snakes were in their box on the side porch, but the boys were reading studiously on the front porch, dressed in their Sunday best, and spotlessly clean.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CLOSING OF SCHOOL.

THE Winthrop school year always ended about the middle of June, and on May first Professor Harding announced that at the closing exercises a prize would be given to the pupil of each grade above the fourth who had prepared the best essay about either a tree or some little wild creature. Professor Harding would not say who had offered the prizes, and he would not say exactly what they were.

"Each prize," he announced, "will be something that any boy or girl would be glad to receive. Beyond that, I cannot tell you."

At recess that day nothing else was talked about. Most of the children felt that it would be useless to try, but when they had

talked it over with their teachers at least half a dozen in each grade were willing to make the effort. You may be very sure that every member of the Saturday Club was planning to do so. For over two years the club had held its meetings regularly, and a more wide-awake group of boys and girls was not to be found in the State. Meetings were usually held indoors in the winter and out-of-doors in warm weather, although once Professor Harding had taken the Club for a mid-winter tramp, over country roads and through wood lots, where they hunted for tracks in the freshly fallen snow.

That had been one of the pleasantest meetings the Club could remember, although Maggie Flynn had always insisted that it should have been called a "going," instead of a "meeting." A soft snow had fallen the night before, and still clung to all the trees and wayside weeds. And how many of the brown weeds there were!

Professor Harding suggested their carrying home a winter bouquet made of one

sprig or branch of each kind of tree, shrub, or weed which gave food to the winter birds, and you would have been surprised to have seen what a large and interesting bouquet it made.

Besides this bouquet, they had found a whole handful of cocoons of various sorts, which they carried to their different houses to keep until spring. Certainly the Club had been a great success, and since it was a year old it had had a great deal of influence among the other children. Air-guns were still used, but seldom to kill birds in Winthrop. Cats were not chased and stoned, and dogs no longer dodged away from the sight of certain small boys.

The members of the Club felt very sure that they knew who was offering the prizes, but when they hinted as much to Mrs. Miller she laughed and shook her head. "I am not the person," she said. "You must guess again."

The night after the announcement had been made, Lucinda and Maggie were walk-

ing home from school with their arms around each other's waists. "Are you going to try for a prize?" asked Maggie.

"Yes," said Lucinda. "I am going to try writing about the Charter Oak, if I can find out enough about it. I have a book that tells a good deal. What are you going to take?"

"I don't know," said Maggie, gloomily. "I had thought of the Charter Oak myself, and I suppose we could both take it, since we are in different grades, but perhaps I will take a bird or a bug instead. There is Patsy. Let's ask him."

"Me," said Patsy. "Oh, I'm going to take Tripod, if Jimmie does n't want him. He is getting to be cuter than ever. He will take food from my fingers every time, and he knows his name for sure."

That ended all talk of essays for a while, and the chipmunk was brought over to the Flynn back garden to show off his little tricks. His cage was set upon a huge old pine stump, near the poultry house, and the

hens' supply of corn was taken from, grain by grain, until the chipmunk had eaten all he could and had his cheeks stuffed full of other kernels. The last that was given him he turned over and over in his thin little claws for a few minutes, and then tucked away under the mass of cotton which lined his sleeping-box in the corner.

"We are going to let him run all around, as soon as the bandage is taken off his leg," said Jimmie, who had come up quickly behind the others. "We darse n't yet, for fear he'd get caught. We keep his cage out of doors, though, all day."

"This makes a good place to set it," remarked Patsy. "Maggie, how much will you take for this stump?"

"Humph! I guess Mother would like to give it away if anybody would take it," was the reply. "She said last year that she could have raised about a dozen more cabbages with this out of the way.

"It would make a lot of firewood, if anybody had the patience to cut it up," said

Ralph, who had just come over with Jack. "That is the kind of wood we brought in for that poor family of Smiths last winter. Jiminy, but this is a whopping big stump! I never thought much about it before."

"I wonder how old it is," said Lucinda. "Let's count."

All six began at once counting the rings which show the age of a tree. They counted aloud, and in about two minutes were hopelessly mixed.

"We could do better if we had some way of marking where we stop," suggested the practical Ralph. "Somebody get some pins, and we'll stick one in at each fiftieth ring. Then if we lose our count we'll go back as far as the fiftieth pin, and try again."

Maggie ran into the house and reappeared with a cushion. "Go ahead," she said.

Lucinda, who was very careful and exact, pointed to the rings, while all counted clearly and slowly together. One pin was stuck in at the fiftieth ring, another at the one hun-

dredth, and a third at the one hundred and fiftieth. It grew very exciting.

"I do hope it will reach two hundred," exclaimed Maggie.

Lucinda's smooth voice went steadily on. "One-fifty-one, one-fifty-two, one-fifty-three."

"Bet you it does," said Jimmie, under his breath.

"Sh!" said Patsy, fiercely.

The children leaned farther and farther over the stump, while the chipmunk, set aside in his cage and forgotten for the time, busied himself with taking the corn from his cheeks and hiding it under the cotton.

"Two hundred!" said Lucinda, excitedly. "Somebody hand me a pin! I'm afraid to get it myself for fear I'll lose my place. There! Now, we'll go on. . . . Two hundred and fourteen rings! Oh, my!"

"When did it start growing?" asked Ralph. "Two hundred and fourteen from eighteen hundred and ninety-five is how much? Four from five is—four from five

is—oh, somebody tell me how much four from five is, anyhow!"

"Hold on a minute," said Patsy. "My father once told me that the pine was cut off from this land in eighteen-eighty, so you must subtract from that, instead."

"Why?" asked Jack. "Oh, yes, I see. Because it stopped growing then. Here are pencil and paper, Ralph."

"Sixteen hundred and sixty-six!" exclaimed Ralph, a minute later. "Just think of it, though! Why, there could n't have been any white people at all here then!"

"See here, boys and girls," said Maggie, solemnly, "I have found the subject for my essay. It 's me own mother's stump, and I surely have a right to it."

"That 's what you have," agreed Ralph.

Lucinda was carefully pulling the pins out from the stump and replacing them on the cushion.

"I should say you had a *right* to *write* all *right*," remarked Ralph, who enjoyed making puns.

"Be sure to use your right hand," added Jack, who did not very clearly understand the meaning of a pun, but wanted a share in the fun.

"I tell you what," said Maggie, "if I get a prize for writing about this stump, let's all bring our supper out here some night and have a stump party."

"I'll *stump* you to," said Patsy.

* * * * *

When the last day of school came there was great excitement in the grades. There were the usual dialogues and recitations, songs by the children, and in the upper grades a few recitations. The last numbers on the program in each room were the prize essays, and, after the visitors had gone, all the pupils were to come together in the big high-school room to see the prizes bestowed by Professor Harding.

Not only the winning essays were mentioned, but all that had been submitted were listed on the board. Maggie Flynn

had won a prize for her essay, "The Story of a Pine." Lucinda had been praised for her paper on "The Charter Oak." Ralph had written about a pair of robins that nested inside the open fire-box of an old traction engine.

"That is a good essay," Professor Harding had said, after looking it over, "but, Ralph, it seems to me that you have said considerably more about the engine than about the birds. I fear this will be barred out from the contest."

"Dear me!" Ralph had exclaimed. "So I have! You see there really was such a nest, but I became so interested in the engine. It was a different type from any I had seen before. Well, anyhow, I've had enough fun out of poking around that engine to pay me for my time."

Jack had asked his mother's advice as to a subject and been told to choose whatever he knew most about. "I guess it will have to be garter-snakes, then," he had said. "I am just full of garter-snakes

these days." That was the title of his essay—merely "Garter-Snakes."

Patsy wrote about "Our Chipmunk." Jimmie started several essays, beginning with one on "Mushrats," and ending with one on "Quales," but each time he became discouraged and put his pages in the kitchen stove.

Two of the prizes fell among the Millers and their most intimate playmates, one to Jack and one to Maggie Flynn. Mr. and Mrs. Miller planned to attend the exercises, and good Mrs. Flynn ironed until nearly twelve the night before in order that she might get away without disappointing any of her customers.

On that warm Friday afternoon the schoolrooms were crowded. The boys looked very stiff and proper in their best suits, and the girls were all in thin white dresses with bows of bright ribbon on their braids. Jack's essay on "Garter-Snakes" was not very long, nor was it perfect in spelling, but he had managed to find out and tell

so many things which his hearers did not know about these quiet little creatures, that he had fairly earned his prize.

Maggie Flynn's essay was longer than any other written by a pupil of her grade, and was much enjoyed. One of the pleasantest things about it was the way that Maggie showed her interest in the tree of which she had written. Her eyes shone and her face fairly glowed as she read.

This was the essay:

"THE STORY OF A PINE.

"The pine tree I want to tell about started in our back garden in sixteen hundred and sixty-four. It was not our back garden then, partly because we were not born and partly because it was not a garden at all. The country around here was just one great pine forest, such as we never see now. The only people were the bands of Indians, who sometimes came through on their way from one camp to another. These were Ojibway Indians.

"The very beginning of the tree was a seed, which grew with a lot of other seeds in a cone on the mother tree. The squirrels ate many of the seeds, but this one dropped to the ground and got covered with a little earth. After a while it began to grow, and it was so tiny that, if a deer or any other wild creature had stepped on it then, it would have been killed. But it was lucky in not being stepped on.

"When this tree was a baby, there were very few white people who lived in this country, and they lived way down east. There was n't any United States at all,—only just the colonies that we learn about in our history. One book that I saw says that 1666 was the year when they had the Great Fire in London. The tree will help me to remember that, even if it was on the other side of the world.

"When the tree was little it had branches near the ground, but as it grew older these dropped off. They did so because they had not enough light. And the tree had to keep

stretching up and up to get its share of light from above, so it did not grow much out sideways. If it had grown alone in a field it would have kept more of its branches, instead of dropping them. Its trunk kept growing, though. Every year it grew some, and now you can tell how old it was by counting the rings on the stump. There is a ring for each year. Some years it grew more than others, and that was because it had the kind of weather that was best for it. But it grew *some* every year and did the best that it could under the circumstances.

"As soon as it was big enough and strong enough, it began to grow cones of its own, and then the squirrels came to its branches and nibbled the cones and ate the seeds. There were raccoons here, too, and all sorts of birds to perch on its branches. And down on the ground were bears and deer and wolves and foxes and wolverenes and wild-cats and the same little creatures that live in the country around here now.

"This tree grew its leaves in little bunches of *five* green needles. That proved that it was a white pine, because the white pine grows a needle for each letter in every bunch, w-h-i-t-e.

"At last a white man passed near the tree. He was a missionary, travelling with the Indians. They never camped under the tree, because it was too far from water and people who are as wise as Indians always camp near water. No more white men came for a long time. Then some came who brought their families and built houses. They cut down trees to build them and made log cabins. But this tree was too big to be used that way, so it was allowed to stand.

"When the children who lived in the log cabin played out of doors, they had to stay near home for fear of bears and wolves. The people made all of their sugar from maple sap, and got all their fruit from wild berry bushes. Most of their meat came from the bears and deer which the men killed. And

the tree kept on growing just the same, even if things were different around it.

"By and by men came and built a railroad near the tree, and after it was done the engines sent great puffs of smoke up into its branches. Soon more men came and put up saw-mills, and then the pine tree saw the other pines around it cut down and carried to the mill to be made into lumber. At last it was cut down and sawed up and sent away on the cars. I don't know exactly what became of the lumber. It may have been used in houses, or in barns, or in bridges. They used to use pine for lots more things than they do now because they could get it more easily.

"After the stump had stood in the open field for several years, and the bark had all rotted and fallen off from it, a Mr. Robins built a house near it and lived there a while. And then some other people lived there and then my mother and I came there to live. And the stump has not *lived* there, because the stump is dead, but it has stayed there.

Pine stumps last for fifty years, because they have so much resin in them, and I hope this will last until I am grown up. Perhaps then I won't mind having it pulled out and burned, but now I like to keep it, and count the rings and think about it.

"It is too bad that the tree has no children living near, and sometime I am going to plant a little white pine near it, for a reminder and to give pleasure to other people when I am far away."

When Maggie finished reading her essay, the applause was long and loud. Mrs. Flynn smiled and nodded to her, and told a neighbor in a loud whisper: "Sure, the child is fair crazy about trees of late. I can't be thinking what has got into her at all at all. She used to be clane agin essays."

When the prize-winners came together in the high-school room to receive their rewards, their teachers, parents, and a few particular friends followed until all the seats were full. Professor Harding made a

short speech, in which he did *not* tell who gave the prizes, and then handed them around.

It seemed almost as though the prizes must have been chosen after the committee had decided who were to receive them, for Maggie had a book about trees, beautifully printed and full of fine pictures. Jack received a pocket microscope which he had long been wanting. The other children had books, butterfly nets, jointed fish poles, and other things which delighted their hearts. After handing out the prizes, Professor Harding spoke a few words more.

"I am glad to put these gifts into your hands," he said. "Use them often and use them carefully, so that you may have lasting pleasure from them. Live out of doors all you can, and learn to understand what you see. Get all the happiness you can in this way, and help to keep the world as beautiful as you found it. I wish you all a happy summer vacation, and hope to see you often during it. Remember that I like

to hear about the interesting things which you have seen."

Here a tiny girl in one of the front seats raised her hand. "I saw Jack's pet snake," she said. "It was a little bit of a snake, but it had a vurry long tay-al!"

Professor Harding laughed, and so did everybody else, but he caught the child up and set her on the table. "This little girl will be a naturalist yet," he said. "That was very interesting about the snake. Now, good-bye, everybody. Vacation has begun."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE JOURNEY NORTH.

AS soon as school closed, the Millers began to make ready for their summer at Pencroft, Mrs. Miller's cottage at Trelago Point, some two hundred miles north of Winthrop. For a while they had talked of renting the cottage and spending the summer at home. Work was going on rapidly in the new house and Mr. Miller had to be there much of the time. It was certain that he could not spend many days at Pencroft. And this year Aurelia had a husband and a mother-in-law and Lucinda to plan for. It was really quite a puzzle.

In the end it was settled that Aurelia, Lucinda, and Mr. Hathaway should go north with Mrs. Miller and the children, and sleep in a tent on the beach, while Mr. Miller

should remain at home until some week when he could be spared for at least a Saturday and Sunday with his family. Mrs. Miller was to return once during the warm weather to look over the new home.

"It all seems so strange," said Ralph, "and so different from the way we have always done before."

"Always?" asked his father. "Let me see, how many seasons have you had at Trelago Point, my son?"

"One," replied Ralph. "Isn't one enough to make an 'always?'" But he knew what his father meant, and stopped putting on airs.

"We are going in a different way, too," said Mrs. Miller. "This year we shall start after supper, reach Westlake at nine, and spend the night at the hotel, taking an early morning express north from there. At Mill City we shall take the morning steamer, just as we did last year. This way of travelling will let us take all of our railroad trip in the cool part of the day."

"Goody!" cried Helen, clapping her hands and dancing up and down in the middle of the room. "Goody! We 'll sleep in another hotel. Do you get fings in every hotel by poking a place in the wall? And will you let me do the poking part of the time?"

"Yes," promised her mother. "You may press the button for the first thing we need. But remember," she added, pretending to be very stern, "you must not carry any kittens in your satchel this time."

Everybody laughed, recalling the trouble that Helen's unlucky kittens had made the year before. Jack whispered loudly to Ralph that they might tuck some garter-snakes into their satchels. Then he looked up at his father with twinkling eyes.

"You might better not," said Mr. Miller. "It will take so much of your time to catch food for them, that you will have no time for anything else if you do."

Then began busy times for everybody. Fishing tackle was collected and packed;

the bathing suits were hunted up; butterfly nets were repaired; Jack's new microscope was boxed for the trip; and a new assortment of books and games was added to the other diversions for rainy days. Helen dressed and re-dressed the one doll that she was to carry with her, and explained repeatedly to the others why they had to remain behind. Nebuchadnezzar had to be told many things also, and warned that he must surely stop chasing birds if he wanted to move into the new house in the fall.

And Lucinda? You know that Lucinda had always lived very quietly. In fact, her one trip to Longfield with the Millers was the only time she had ever been on a railroad train. Now she was greatly excited, and it was well that she had not been told of the plan until after vacation began. She coaxed Aurelia into buying her a bathing suit and a soft cap for boating. One other thing which she wanted was a satchel, and, after talking it all over with Mrs. Miller,

Aurelia had unwrapped Mrs. Shaw's satchel and given it to the eager child.

"Use it an' be happy with it," she said. "I guess your grandma 'd like to have you gettin' the good of it somehow, and 't ain't as though it was a veil or a thin apern that you 'd swish out in no time."

Lucinda looked very sober for a few minutes; then remembered from how much pain her grandmother had escaped, wiped her eyes, and went about her packing. This was almost five days before they were to start, and she repacked the satchel nine times within those five days, each time making some slight change in the contents.

Mr. Miller insisted this year, as he had done before, that the house and garden should be left in perfect order, and that the children should help as much as possible during the last busy days. Hoops and hoop-sticks, bats, and all such impracticable out-of-door playthings, had to be gathered into the playhouse and locked up. The croquet set had to be taken up and stowed away and

missing balls found in the shrubbery, where they had rolled from sight. Mr. Miller had suggested that the boys make a list, to prevent forgetting anything, but they were sure that they could remember without it. Lucinda had to help Grandma Hathaway move her possessions over to Mrs. Flynn's, where she was to have the one spare room for the summer.

And oh, the questions that were asked during that last day! Aurelia stood it until eleven o'clock, and then she said to Jack; "Jest as sure as you ask me one more question before dinner, I will stop cookin' anything for you. I can't use my strength to answer you an' feed you both, an' I 'm terrible drove with work."

Then the children took all their questions to their mother, and asked, "Why did you do that?" and "Why don't you do this?" until that poor lady was well-nigh distracted. Mr. Miller came to help her.

"If your questions are important," he said, "write them neatly and put them in

a box on the dining-table, and I will answer them at noon, but now you must go out of doors and stay out. Have you done all your work there?"

"Every single thing," insisted the three children, and left. Of course they did not write out their questions, because that meant too much work for them; and then, the questions would look so silly on paper!

They were to take the seven o'clock train, and at half-past four o'clock were called in to bathe and dress, before having an early supper. The boys were chattering away in their room when Jack suddenly cried, "Ralph! I never took those old tins to the dumping ground!"

"Why, Jack!" exclaimed Ralph. "Why, Jack! And Father said particularly that you were to do it, and we told him solemnly that we had everything done."

"I know," said Jack, with a scarlet face. "They were out in the barn-yard and I didn't see them, so I forgot. I'm going to do it now."

"You can't," objected Ralph. "You won't have time. Father won't let you."

"I'm going to do it," said Jack. "You go right on getting ready. You try to make noise enough for two boys, so they won't miss me and get worried, and I'll just rush. I'll go without my supper, if I have to, but I'd feel *mean* to leave those cans where they are. I'd rather go hungry one night than to feel mean all summer."

As he spoke Jack was putting on the old clothing which he had just then removed, and now he slipped down the back stairs and out of doors. The wheelbarrow was noiselessly taken to the barn-yard, and the old tins loaded in as quickly and quietly as possible. Then Jack peeped through the barn-yard gate to make sure that nobody was looking, and started for the dumping ground as fast as he dared to go. Once a rough place in the walk sent some of the cans rolling into the ditch, but, on the whole, he was very lucky. When he crossed the railroad a

train had just passed. "Good thing for me!" he muttered. "If I'd had to wait for that, I don't know what I would have done!"

To Ralph the minutes seemed like hours. He began to wonder what would happen if Jack were late, too late to get properly dressed. Would Mother let him travel in his old clothes? Would she make him stay at home with Father? Or would she make them all wait until the next day? It was a dreadful thought, and Ralph's mouth became dry and his lips felt stiff when it ocurred to him. It seemed to him that his heart stopped beating for a minute, and after that it thumped harder than ever.

"Ralph," called his mother from the foot of the stairs, "are you attending right to your work? You know that sometimes you and Jack get to playing."

"We are not playing now," answered Ralph, quite honestly. "Please don't worry about us."

Then he looked out of the window again

for Jack. There he was, away down the street, coming on the run and pushing the empty barrow in front of him. Ralph sprang to get everything ready for his brother—hot water in the tub, a dry towel on the rack, and all his clean clothing laid out in order on the bed. He saw him slip into the garden, wheel the barrow to the barn, and then run for the back door and the staircase.

"O Jack, I've been so anxious!" cried Ralph. "I began to think you would be left to-night, and I didn't know what we could do if you were."

"It's just five," said Jack, hurrying off his waist so fast that the buttons made a popping sound as they slipped through the button-holes. "I'll be ready 'n half 'n hour, see 'f I 'm not."

He was, but he had never hurried so in all his life, and Mrs. Miller, hearing the quick steps on the floor over her head, decided that her boys must have played for a while after all. Ralph helped in every

way he could, and when Aurelia called "Supper!" two very clean and happy boys came romping down the stairs to enjoy their bowls of brown bread and milk.

The four children were allowed to ride to the station on the drag that carried the trunks, each sitting on one and feeling very lofty and dignified. On the way down they heard the whistle of an incoming train.

"Oh," cried Lucinda, almost ready to jump from the dray. "There's the train this minute! Do hurry the horses and we'll ask the conductor to wait for the grown-ups."

"Now, you jest set right still where you was, Sissy," said the stout drayman. "That there is only the hog train, and you know what that is. It takes all sorts of freight an' live stock exceptin' folks. It's got to fool around the tracks here considerable before your train comes along."

Lucinda settled back onto her trunk with a sigh of relief, but when she reached the station she refused to go inside, preferring

to stay out where she could watch the rest of the party coming down the street. Helen spent her time in examining a weighing machine in the waiting-room. Ralph and Jack visited with Maggie Flynn and the Flannigans, who had come down with Grandma Hathaway to see them off.

When the train pulled in, three grown people and four happy children climbed the steps and made their way into the cars. Mr. Miller waved them a good-bye from the station platform; Maggie darted toward the open car window and urged Lucinda to write to her; Jimmie, overcome by a sudden generous impulse, darted after Maggie and gave Helen a beautiful red toy balloon, which he had purchased only that afternoon from a pedler; Patsy stuck his hands a little deeper into his pockets and whistled, to show that he did not wish to go, and then said, "Well, good-bye, everybody! We'll take care of the town for you till you get back."

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor, the

wheels began turning, and—they had really started north.

At Westlake there was a ride in a dimly-lighted, noisy, jolting omnibus, and Helen was so sleepy that she almost tumbled off from Mr. Hathaway's lap. The other children were tired, and Jack winked very, very slowly, but they sat bolt upright, and tried to see as much of the city as possible while pitching along through its streets.

The boys had a room to the right of Mrs. Miller's and opening into it. Helen and Lucinda had a room to the left, which also had a connecting door. The little girls were quite overcome by the idea of having an hotel room to themselves. Helen awakened enough to claim her mother's promise.

"May I poke the wall for some ice-water?" she asked, as soon as they were all upstairs.

"Yes," said Mrs. Miller, "you may press the button."

"In my own room?" asked Helen.

"Yes."

"With the door sort of shut between, so it will look as though we're travelling alone?" persisted Helen.

"Yes," said Mrs. Miller, smiling down into the happy face before her.

"May I—may I press the button for something, too?" asked Lucinda, timidly.

"You may in the morning, when we need help about carrying down the bags," replied Mrs. Miller.

"Hurry up, Lucinda," said Helen, running back into their room and closing the door after them. "Now I am going to ring. . . . Would you dare if you were I?"

"I—I guess so," faltered Lucinda, suddenly feeling that it was a bold thing to do.

"I'm going to," announced Helen. "There! I've done it. . . . My, how long it takes him to come! . . . There! I hear him on the stairs now. . . . You ask him—I'm scared!"

Lucinda shook her head and the bell-boy tapped on the door. Helen opened it.

"Please bring me a pitcher of ice-water," she said, with dignity.

"Here it is, ma'am," said the bell-boy, a tall negro, walking in and filling an empty pitcher on the stand. As he closed the door after him in leaving, Helen turned proudly to Lucinda.

"Did you hear him call me 'ma'am'?" she said. "I was n't scared a bit at last."

Ten minutes later Lucinda and the little "ma'am" were tucked in bed and told not to speak a single word before morning. In the other room, the two boys stopped right in the middle of a whispered conversation, as Mrs. Miller turned out the lights.

"Only, Mother," Ralph had begged, "may we get up in the morning and dress ahead of the rest, if we are awake and will be *very* quiet?"

"No," replied his mother promptly. "You are not to touch your feet to the floor until you are called. If one of you awakens early he is not to arouse the other fellow."

"All right," said Ralph, but he thought it rather hard.

At five the next morning the night clerk tapped upon their door. Ralph heard the sharp tapping and dreamed that it was a red-headed woodpecker. Jack did not dream at all or even hear it. The clerk tapped again.

"That is only a telegraph pole," murmured Ralph, without moving. "You 'd better hunt for a tree."

The clerk tapped again.

Ralph opened his eyes. "I 'm up," he cried. "You need n't tap again. I 'd have answered sooner, only I thought you were a woodpecker."

Ralph shook Jack and said, "Wake up! We 're in a hotel and have to get dressed for the train."

Jack tumbled out before his eyes were open and landed against the dresser. Mrs. Miller called softly to know whether they were up, and then went to help the little girls.

At a quarter before six, the porter,

called by Lucinda, carried the bags down to the omnibus, and the party followed. After a long ride in the gray light of the early morning, past the quiet houses and over the misty river, they reached the other station and waited there a few minutes for their train.

When it came thundering in, they were all hurried aboard, for it was an express and stops were short. The dining-car would not be open until seven, and they ate their breakfast from the neatly-packed boxes which Aurelia had made ready in Winthrop. It did taste so good!

"It seems to me these boiled eggs have a speshual flavor," said Jack.

"Lemon or vanilly?" asked Aurelia from across the aisle.

"Neither," replied Jack, who knew that she was making fun of him. "I think it's just Pencroft!"

"Maybe it is the North Country Express," suggested Ralph (that was the name of their train). "A few cinders might have come

in through the window and been mixed with the pepper and salt you put on them."

It was the first time that any of the children had ever had such an early ride on a train, and they found it delightful. The country through which they passed was beautiful with rivers and forests, and all the fields were fresh and green. Comfortable looking farm-houses appeared here and there, big barns also, and animals grazing in the pastures. Once in a while the whistle of the locomotive made the children look more sharply still, as they dashed through some small town without even slowing down. At such places somebody was generally on the station platform, waving a good morning to the train-crew.

"Do you know what I fink?" said Helen. "I fink that, excepting the men at the stations, fings are pretty much like the place where the Sleeping Princess was. You know everyfing was asleep around where she lived until the Prince came."

"That is so!" exclaimed the boys. Lu-

cinda, who had never happened to hear the story of the Sleeping Beauty, looked somewhat puzzled.

"Now, look at those horses we 're coming to," said Jack, excitedly. "You might almost think they were asleep in the King's pasture, just the way that they stood grazing when the Princess fell asleep."

At that moment the horses kicked up their hind feet and went running wildly away from the approaching train.

"We must be the Prince coming to wake them up," said Ralph. "We made a good job of it that time surely."

After seven the little towns looked more as the children were used to seeing them, and they grew impatient to reach Mill City and take the steamer. Mrs. Miller suggested that they make up a game of some sort to pass the time. There were very few passengers in the car, and they could have as much room as they wished.

"There is a game," she said, "the name of which I have forgotten, which is played

by people sitting on opposite sides of the car and watching for certain objects. We might arrange a game of that sort and make up the rules ourselves."

After a little changing around Ralph and Helen took a double seat one side of the car, and Jack and Lucinda a double seat on the other. Each had pencil and paper, and the score was to be kept until they saw the first smoke-stack of Mill City. Then those who had the higher score for their side of the train were to be called the winners. Each cow or horse seen was to count one; each flock of sheep or drove of hogs was to count five; and the other objects counted were: a windmill, four; a lake or pond, ten; and a station, fifteen. Rivers they decided not to count at all, because they wound and turned, and crossed and recrossed under the track so often that there was danger of making mistakes in the record.

"I think," said Ralph, "that this is the most interesting—cow! That gives us the first count!"

"I don't care," said Lucinda. "It won't take us long to catch—a span of horses! There now! We're ahead of you."

"Windmill! Windmill!" cried Helen. "How much did you say that would be? Four? Oh, goody!"

"We're whistling for a station," cried Ralph. "Hope it'll be on our side."

"I think it will be on ours," said Lucinda, and sure enough it was.

It was a very interesting game. It was so interesting, in fact, that people farther back in the car put down their books and papers to watch the fun. Once in a while Mrs. Miller motioned the children to speak more softly, but usually they were very careful.

Aurelia, sitting in the seat back of Lucinda and Jack, watched Lucinda happily. "Ain't it the queerest thing, Fred," she said to Mr. Hathaway, who sat beside her, "ain't it the queerest thing, the way she came to us? Why, I more'n half expect to wake up every minute an' find it all ain't so! When I came home with

the Millers from Trelago Point last year, I was jist a lonely woman, an' felt dreadful middle-aged. Now I'm goin' back, ten months later, feelin' as young as I ever did, an' with a good husband, an' with a dear old lady for a mother, an' with Lucinda for our little girl."

"Forgotten something, have n't you, Aurelia?" asked Mr. Hathaway. "You are coming from a home of your own, even if it is a little one and you are not in it all the time."

"No," said Aurelia. "I ain't forgot it. Maybe I did n't speak of it, but I never forget it. An' the new one Mr. Miller is havin' fixed for us over his new stable is goin' to be terrible cosy, and so much handier. Sakes alive! When I think of it I most wish we were goin' back, this minute, to move in. If there 's one thing I like better then house-cleanin', it is movin', an', though I 've done a pile of it for other folks, I never did any for Aurelia Shackleton."

"This will be for Aurelia Hathaway," remarked her husband.

"What?" said Aurelia. "Oh, yes! Did you ever see anybody so stupid? I ain't learned my own name yet."

"*The next stop which this train makes,*" announced the brakeman, "*is Mill City, steamboat landing! Passengers for the station please keep their seats.*"

"Oh!" said Lucinda, catching her first glimpse of the blue waters of the bay, and wondering if a certain large white object, which she saw for a second between two buildings, could possibly be the steamer. The game, which a minute before had been so interesting, was now entirely forgotten. Everybody stood to arrange the hand-luggage and take deep breaths of the fine, fresh air.

Helen went to a window near the door and gazed out of it in quiet contentment. The boys, satchel in hand, both chattered at once and pointed in bewildering fashion right and left as they tried to show and describe everything to Lucinda at once. She nodded and smiled, and nodded again, but looked for only one thing, the steamer.

"Oh, there it is!" she cried, as the train stopped. "Do you remember two years ago, when you were out at Grandma's farm, and we played that the lumber wagon was this very boat? I never dreamed that it was like this."

The steamer was whistling to hurry the passengers along, and the children raced ahead of the rest. Mrs. Miller tried to keep up with them, but Mr. Hathaway and Aurelia had much to carry and followed more slowly.

"Hello, Captain Morse!" cried the little Millers. "This is Lucinda Shaw. She's coming, too. May we go right straight to the upper deck?"

The good-natured captain laughed and nodded. On the upper deck a pleasant-faced woman suddenly arose and waved her handkerchief to Mrs. Miller, who exclaimed, "There is Mrs. Vanderlip now!"

Ten minutes later the steamer was headed for Trelago Point, Pencroft, and the healthy, hearty out-of-door life in the woods. High

in the bow were the little Millers and their party.

"Oh," said Lucinda, for the fiftieth time. "Is n't it lovely!"

"You just wait," said the little Millers. "You just wait and see what else is going to happen!"

But that is another story.

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